THE IMAGE TRAP

M.G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics

M.S.S. Pandian

VISIT…

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Praise for The Image Trap

[This] is by far the most convincing study of the subject…The book is a work of sound scholarship and will no doubt lure researchers to this fascinating field of popular culture and politics. Pandian has offered a splendid model. The added attractions in the book are an exhaustive bibliography and a complete filmography of MGR, which includes films like Thasipenn *(1943), invariably omitted in such lists.*

—***S. Theodore Bhaskaran***, *The Hindu*

M.S.S. Pandian's The Image Trap *is a lively, concerned essay in understanding the influence exercised by M.G. Ramachandran [MGR] on a fan following consisting in substantial part of the Tamil poor.*

—***Ravi Vasudevan***, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*

In the Indian subaltern studies *tradition, this work of critical social history is recommended to all students of south India.*

—***Glenn Yocum***, *Religious Studies Review*

Pandian nevertheless provides a fascinating and revealing analysis if M.G.R. in film and the filmy politics *in Tamil Nadu.*

—***Robert L. Hardgrave Jr***, *Pacific Affairs*

…it is a bold endeavour for the reason that (the author) has focused his study on the late M.G. Ramachandran…It is not a study just in the techniques of image building but he also brings out fairly successfully the interface and interplay between the media and

political processes…The moral of the story is not written at the end of the book…But it is explicit in the very title of the book. An image could be a trap, *beware of it.*

—***P.D. Kulkarni***, *Social Change*

Written in a very lucid style, [it] is a must for all interested in understanding Tamil Nadu politics.

—***Kushal Deb***, *Social Action*

Far from being a mere panegyric to a vanished film superhero and idol of the masses, this volume is another well published book from SAGE, succinct and to the point*…The book is full of fascinating details about the extent to which MGR was successful in creating this image and of what repercussions it had.* The Image Trap *is a useful book for both students of Indian politics and Indian cinema and a welcome addition to the literature on the connection between image and voter behaviour.*

—***R.S. Newman***, *South Asia*

[It] is an interesting attempt in trying to resolve this puzzle [of MGR's unparalleled political success].

—***Sushila Ravindranath***, *Seminar*

[Pandian's] book is unconventional in style and organization, a blend of essay-writing, political rhetoric, and scholarship. It is a lively study that should interest all students of contemporary Indian politics.

—***Pamela G. Price***, *The Journal of Asian Studies*

The author's writing style makes the book an enjoyable reading *even for a lay reader without sacrificing the references, footnotes, and documentation that academic readers look for. Pandian has the*

academic credentials and proximity to the theme in writing The Image Trap.

—***S. Sreenivas Rao***, *Vikalpa*

In the absence of any worthwhile work on the Tamil phenomenon, who strode the film industry and the state political arena like a colossus for over two decades, Pandian's is a seminal contribution. It has attempted to see MGR in a meaningful way, neither glorifying him nor denigrating him.

—***P.K. Balachandran***, *The Sunday Observer*

Pandian's book is exhaustive, in spite of its slim 145-page stretch. There is a delightful bibliography, and an exhaustive filmography to go with it…it makes gripping reading too.

—***L. Narayanan***, *The Hindustan Times*

But despite the familiarity of the ground covered, the terrain is still interesting, *especially at a time when established political parties turn increasing(ly) to actors and actresses in the hope that their screen images will bring the votes home.*

—***Ranjana Sengupta***, *The Times of India*

The Image Trap

Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of fascism is ‘the introduction of aesthetics into political life.’ The violation of the masses, whom fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values.

Walter Benjamin

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First published in 1992
Reissued in 2015 by

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B1/I-1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044, India
www.sagepub.in

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320, USA

SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP, United Kingdom

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Published by Vivek Mehra for SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, typeset in 11/13 pts Adobe Garamond Pro by RECTO Graphics, Delhi and printed at Sai Print-o-Pack, New Delhi.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ePub ISBN: 9789351504849

The SAGE Team: Shambhu Sahu, Sanghamitra Patowary, Mriga Maithel, Kishor Kunal and Rajinder Kaur

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My mother

and

The memory of my father

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Source: Author.

Preface

The saga of M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) is analysed as a modern-day political myth in this book. Eulogised by his followers as the undisputed patron saint of the poor in Tamil Nadu and lampooned by his opponents as a political jester, MGR thrived in Tamil politics like none else had done before. He was a legend in his own lifetime. MGR's loyal supporters willingly laid down their lives whenever he was caught in a personal or a political crisis. His political opponents are, even after his death, haunted by the emotion that his name continues to evoke among common people in the state.

What is significant about the phenomenon of MGR is that he was not merely a political personality, but was also a film star and a politician at the same time. In fact, his early popularity rested substantially on his successful roles in films. He began his film career at Madras studios in 1936. From the 1950s onwards, MGR meticulously etched out a stereotypical image of himself on the screen by drawing on widely dispersed popular idioms and sentiments. He intervened to alter storylines, dialogues and lyrics, so that all of them both cohered with this received image and strengthened it. From 1953 to 1972, when he was a member of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the Tamil regional party which during its early days stood for a sovereign Tamil Nadu, atheism and anti-Brahminism, his films propagated a mild, watered down version

of the DMK's ideology, and displayed the party's icons and colours on the screen. Given the DMK's overt allegiance to cinema as a vehicle for political communication, it skilfully transferred MGR's cinematic image to the domain of politics and invested it with a certain lifelike authenticity. There was, thus, a constant merger of the cinematic and the real in the politics of the DMK—a merger that was highly rewarding. It yielded a rich haul of votes, election after election. But once MGR was forced to leave the DMK in 1972 and form his own political outfit, the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK), which was subsequently rechristened the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), most of this support from the *frontbenchers*, who had already lost themselves in the make-believe world of MGR's films and filmy politics, went with him and stood with him in good stead till his death in 1987.

This essay has been written primarily as an exercise in self-clarification. I am one among those many—both within and outside the state of Tamil Nadu—who have been puzzled and pained by MGR's unparalleled political success. His 11-year rule (1977–87) was undoubtedly one of the darkest periods in the contemporary history of the state. Under his dispensation, profiteers of different kinds—liquor barons, real-estate magnates and the ubiquitous ruling party politicians—greatly prospered while a stagnant, if not declining economy forced the poor who constituted the mainstay of MGR's support into unbearable misery. The well-honed police machinery in Tamil Nadu, with its characteristic ruthlessness and MGR's open blessings, snuffed out even the mildest of dissent from subalterns whether they were workers, poor peasants or professionals, such as school teachers and government employees. His rule also witnessed a considerable dilution of the cultural gains achieved by the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu due to the relentless struggles

waged by the Dravidian Movement during its early progressive phase. In place of the earlier rationalism, religious revivalism now reigned supreme.

Despite all these drawbacks, MGR and his party enjoyed large-scale support from the subalterns. Only his death in 1987 could dislodge him from the centre stage of Tamil politics and give a fresh lease of life to his political opponents. In fact, even death could not undo him fully. Given his continuing popularity, MGR's erstwhile opponents are today inaugurating memorials for him in a desperate bid to win over his supporters to their side. How did MGR succeed the way he did? This study is an effort to unravel this complex terrain of Tamil politics.

At another level, it is motivated by a certain academic concern regarding significant lacunae in the current scholarship on both the past and present politics of the subaltern classes in India. Let me explain this further. The growing body of literature on the politics of the subaltern classes in India has indeed made substantial advances in understanding various modes of dissent, different forms of protest movements and the multiplicity of anti-establishment discourses. Two volumes on peasant and agrarian struggles in India edited by Desai (1979, 1986) and six volumes of subaltern studies edited by Guha (1982, 1983) would bear ample testimony to this significant achievement. To study dissent is to study how the oppressed resist, challenge and even undermine the hegemony and authority of the ruling elite, and try to come into their own through certain oppositional politics.

While it is, no doubt, important to study such counter-hegemonic projects of the subaltern classes and draw political lessons from it, it is equally, if not more, important to recognise that these projects of dissent are few and far between. In other words, the dominant reality

has been and is one of the subalterns conceding to the authority of the ruling elites (often through such processes as overt and covert deference to them as well as emulation of their values). This important, and rather pervasive, aspect of subaltern politics has hardly received the attention it deserves in current scholarship. In my view, the MGR phenomenon could be a worthwhile instance from the contemporary political history of Tamil Nadu to be studied in order to explain this relatively unexplored area of how the elites produce consent from those whom they dominate. This book on the MGR phenomenon is, thus, situated in a specific academic context as well.

In talking about the politics of hegemony, we have to bear in mind that the proliferating body of literature on MGR and his politics in the form of books, pamphlets, biographies and newspaper articles, especially in Tamil, is dominated by MGR's hegemonic sway. All of these are normally adulatory, with little respect for facts, peddling hagiography as history. Ironically, every critical reconstruction of the MGR phenomenon, including the present one, has to come to terms with this hagiography (because of its overwhelming presence among the literate poor in Tamil Nadu), and at the same time transcend the limits set by such hagiography. In fact, I have used this sort of literature as an important source of data to explore how MGR was popularly represented among the common people.

Finally, a few words about the structure of this book are in order. It does not follow a linear chronological narration of events which went into the making of the MGR phenomenon. Instead, it elaborates different, yet related, aspects and ties them together into a coherent narrative by establishing their interconnections. It begins by outlining why the MGR phenomenon needs serious exploration and moves on to elaborate the various elements of the cinematic image of MGR, the reasons for its popular acceptance and its embeddedness or

otherwise in the pre-existing cultural idioms of the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu. Proceeding further, it analyses how this screen image was successfully transferred to the terrain of politics through what one may term the *constructed biographies* of MGR. These *constructed biographies* are carefully constituted popular narratives which dovetail his real life with his screen image, as if there were no differences between the two. Finally, it traces the relationship between the material/economic conditions of the subaltern classes and the rise of the MGR phenomenon.

But for minimal editing to ensure stylistic consistency and factual accuracy, the present edition of the book has not changed from the previous one. Some of the photographs used in this edition are new.

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Acknowledgements

There are a large number of people who have intellectually contributed to the making of this essay. It would be difficult to acknowledge all of them individually. I would, however, like to express my gratitude, in particular, to V. Geetha, S.V. Rajadurai, Padmini Swaminathan, A.R. Venkatachalapathy, Anandhi S., J. Jeyaranjan, J.R. Bhashyam, K. Venkatesh, Rakesh Kumar and George Mathew with whom I had rewarding interactions at different stages of this work. They also read drafts of this book and made valuable suggestions. Apart from commenting on the draft, A.R. Venkatachalapathy translated from Tamil to English the film lyrics used in the book. Pon Kothandapani was generous with the material, painstakingly collected over the years, on MGR and the AIADMK. In the formative period of this work, several people, especially Arun Kumar Patnaik, Barun De, R.S. Rao, Sarajit Majumdar and Anjan Ghosh, rewarded me with stimulating conversations on the issues to be pursued. Santhosh Sadanand and Sneha Rahavan went through the previous edition of the book and alerted me about the stylistic inconsistencies and factual inaccuracies, which I have corrected. I am grateful to all of them.

1

Perhaps, the best way to begin the incomparable success story of Marudur Gopalamenon Ramachandran (popularly known as MGR) and his politics is to begin with his funeral. When MGR died as the longest serving chief minister of Tamil Nadu, in the early hours of 24 December 1987, Madras city witnessed one of the world's largest funerals. No less than two million people, including several who had travelled long distances from remote villages, formed MGR's funeral procession. In other places, people who could not attend the actual funeral organised mock funerals, in which images of MGR were taken out in procession and buried with full rituals. Countless young men tonsured their heads; a Hindu ritual usually performed when someone of the family dies. Thirty-one of his desolate followers, unable to contain their grief, committed suicide.[1]

MGR's eventful political career was marked all along by such great devotion from his followers. On 12 January 1967, he was shot at and injured by one of his co-actors of much fame—a Dravidar Kazhagam activist—M.R. Radha. 'Within hours of the shooting, some 50,000 people had gathered at the hospital where MGR was taken. People were crying in the streets; shops closed. Twenty *rickshawwallahs* (rickshaw-pullers) cycled all the way from Bangalore to see MGR. For six weeks, he laid in the hospital as fans awaited each report of his health.'[2] Likewise, the reaction of his followers was swift when he was suspended from the primary membership of the DMK, on the fateful 10 October 1972, for violating party discipline and airing

charges of corruption against his own party colleagues in public. Soon after the news reached the public, shops were closed throughout Tamil Nadu, cinema shows cancelled, DMK flag posts cut down, huge and strident protest rallies organised and state-owned transport buses stoned. Rioting and other forms of protest continued for no less than three weeks, despite severe police repression unleashed by the DMK government, then headed by Muthuvel Karunanidhi. The protesters cost the state exchequer ₹60 lakhs in terms of damages to state-owned transport buses alone.[3]

The reaction of his followers was more acute—and, in a sense, morbid—when he suffered a paralytic stroke in October 1984, and was flown to Brooklyn in the United States for treatment. At least 21 people immolated themselves or cut off their limbs or fingers as offerings to various deities, praying for the ailing leader's life. More than a hundred people attempted self-immolation, but were prevented from doing so.[4] The hysterical religious revival that had followed MGR's debilitating illness served to reveal how shallow and ineffective the Dravidian Movement's many decades of anti-religious propaganda had been. According to an estimate, out of the 79,000 roadside temples found in Tamil Nadu, 27,000 sprung up during MGR's illness.[5]

What is significant about all this is that the majority of MGR's followers were drawn from the subaltern classes. A public opinion survey conducted by the Department of Statistics, Madras Christian College, in 1986, is eloquent on this point. It concluded,

> Forty per cent of the respondents said that they strongly supported Mr. M.G. Ramachandran and in addition thirty per cent of them had a good opinion of him. About twenty per cent opposed him. MGR gets his strongest support from the landless agricultural labourers in the hamlets and villages. Among those who are illiterates sixty per cent are strong supporters of MGR; but among the college-educated about twenty per cent are his strong

supporters. In other words, MGR gets his greatest support from the poorest among the poor.[6]

A number of other studies have also arrived at similar conclusions. For example, a sociological study of the MGR fan club members published in 1980 found 73.4 per cent of MGR fans to be earning less than ₹400 per month.[7] Interestingly, this political bond between MGR and the poor in Tamil Nadu is almost a commonplace to be portrayed as an element of realism in South Indian films. In G. Aravindan's *Chidamparam* (1985), the house of a Tamil migrant worker's family labouring in the high ranges of Kerala is decorated with a calendar carrying three garish-looking portraits of MGR. In P. Durai's *Pasi* (1979), the heroine, a ragpicker, collects film posters as garbage, but spares only those showing the face of MGR. Both the films won national awards.

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[1] Committing suicide, both as a form of protest and as a form of affirming one's loyalty to a political leader or party, has been common in recent day Tamil politics. During the 1965 anti-Hindi agitation in Tamil Nadu, several DMK men committed suicide as a form of protest against the imposition of Hindi on the Tamil-speaking people. As soon as the DMK came to power in 1967, it made it a point to honour the memory of these martyrs by installing statues of them and naming public utilities, such as bridges, after them. Also, during the 1967 election campaign, the DMK staged a propagandist play on the life of one of the anti-Hindi self-immolators, Keezhpazhavoor Chinnasamy. Barnett, Marguarite Ross. (1976). *The politics of cultural nationalism in South India*. Princeton, p. 219; Karunanidhi, M. (1975). *Nenchukku Needhi* (Vol. I). Madras (in Tamil), pp. 494–95, 553–54 and 581; and Parthasarathy, T.M. (1973). *Ti. Mu. Ka. Varalaru*. Madras (in Tamil), pp. 495–97.

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2

Paradoxically, this political devotion of the subaltern classes to MGR was not because he had pursued radical economic policies during his 11-year rule. His rule saw no major structural change in the economy nor lessened the sufferings of the poor. A detailed study of the means by which the Tamil Nadu state had raised its resources and the manner in which it had expended them demonstrated clearly that the AIADMK government under MGR taxed the poor (and the middle classes) to profit the rich, especially the rural rich.[1]

During 1975–85, the revenue drawn from sales tax, which fell by and large on the consumer products used by the middle classes, such as cotton and yarn, drugs, pulses, tea, sugarcane, electrical goods and soap, accounted for about 60 per cent of the total tax revenue of the state. The poor, especially the very poor, were not, on the whole, affected by the sales tax as their consumption was confined to food and other bare necessities. However, the poor contributed to the state exchequer quite heavily in terms of excise revenue. In 1975–80, the share of revenues from excise in the total tax revenue was only 1 per cent. In 1980–81, the AIADMK government, going back on its election promise, relaxed the prohibition on liquor consumption. This led to a sharp increase in the excise revenue. In 1980–85, it accounted for a substantial 13.9 per cent of the total revenue of the state. The fact that about 80 per cent of the excise revenue came from country spirits, such as arrack and

toddy, which were widely consumed by the urban and rural poor, showed that it was them who paid the bulk of the excise revenue, which almost doubled from ₹110 crores in 1981–82 to ₹201 crores in 1984–85.

On the contrary, the policies pursued by the MGR regime allowed the wealthier classes to remain more or less untaxed. Direct taxes, such as land revenue, agricultural income tax and urban land tax, which by their very nature fall on the rich, accounted for a meagre 4.6 per cent of the total tax revenue of the Tamil Nadu government during 1975–80. This further declined to a mere 1.9 per cent during 1980–85. Significantly, the revenue from direct taxes accounted for a hefty 15.5 per cent of the tax revenue in 1960–65. Thus, the impact of direct taxes on the incomes and wealth of the rich in Tamil Nadu, under MGR's rule, was negligible:

> …direct taxes on agriculture have throughout this period (1960–80) been less than 2 per cent of income from agriculture and have actually declined from around 1.9 per cent in the 1960s to about 1.1 per cent in the late 1970s. Direct taxation on agricultural incomes is thus insignificant and has become even more so in a period in which agricultural incomes have grown on account of the new technology and the spread of pumpsets both of which have particularly benefited larger farmers.

The story was hardly different during the 1980s.

If MGR's rule thrived on taxing the poor, it benefited the rich, especially the landed rural rich, through public spending. A case in point is the subsidised electricity supplied to the agricultural sector. From 1979 onwards, the MGR government reduced in stages the tariff on electricity supplied for agricultural use. The loss to the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board on account of this largesse ‘had averaged at ₹ 150 crores annually during 1980–85 and have more than doubled over the period.’ In the same manner, public irrigation facilities on

which the government had invested large amounts of public funds were also provided to the agricultural sector at heavily subsidised rates. In all, during MGR's rule, the subsidy to the agricultural sector in the state added up to ₹200 crores every year. It benefited mostly the pumpset-owning rich farmers who had organised themselves into a powerful lobby under the banner of the Tamil Nadu Agriculturists' Association (*Tamil Nadu Vivasaigal Sangam*) and pursued, on and off, the path of agitational politics.

What the rich gained under MGR's dispensation was definitely more than what the budgetary figures reveal. Through legal as well as not-so-legal means, the AIADMK government siphoned off public funds worth crores of rupees to private interests, such as liquor manufacturers and urban real-estate contractors. The perversely unique liquor policy of the AIADMK government allowed the liquor manufacturers to decide the price at which they would supply Indian Made Foreign Liquors (IMFLs) to the state-run Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC), which was entrusted with the wholesale liquor trade in the state. Unlike anywhere else in India, it was not the manufacturers who paid the excise duty on IMFL in Tamil Nadu, but the state government via the TASMAC. The AIADMK government also exempted the liquor manufacturers from paying any excise duty on rectified spirit. All this led to a colossal loss of over ₹100 crores annually to the state exchequer for seven years.[2] Further, the state-run profit-making enterprises were passed on to private control for a pittance and government-owned urban land was given away to vested interests at throwaway prices.[3]

The anti-poor policies of the AIADMK government were not confined to the budgetary processes alone. It exhibited callousness and insensitivity to the problems of the poor, even in other policy matters. Let me cite two instances. Between 1977 and 1985, the

central government had allotted ₹26.70 lakhs to the Tamil Nadu government for the rehabilitation of bonded labourers. The AIADMK government failed to spend as large an amount as ₹17.04 lakhs and returned ₹3.68 lakhs as not required.[4] In the same vein, the AIADMK government had not revised the minimum wages for farm labourers since 1983. This is despite the insistence of the union government on a revision once every two years.[5]

The structural consequence of such lopsided economic interventions is glaring. There was economic misery all round for the poor in Tamil Nadu. Well, over 40 per cent of the people in the state continued to languish below the officially defined poverty line and over time, the situation did not improve.[6] Moreover, the rate of unemployment in the state also showed an upward trend. 'Between 1972–73 and 1983, the rural male unemployment *rate* in Tamil Nadu showed an increase of 86 per cent which was much higher than the 17.8 per cent for the country as a whole, while the urban unemployment rate, over 1977–78 to 1983, increased in Tamil Nadu when it decreased at the All-India level.'[7]

Such structural imbalances were, however, accompanied by a number of populist economic schemes, the most important one being the chief minister's Nutritious Meal Programme, which was launched with much fanfare in 1982:

> From July 1982…rural pre-school children registered from the age of 2 at balwadis or nurseries and all of the 3.8 million registered school attenders under the age of 10 have been entitled to one free meal daily throughout the year. 5.6 million participated in the scheme at its inception. Then in September 1982 it was extended to children in urban areas and in the cities of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore adding an increment of 6.5 lakhs of participants. Two months later a monthly supply of tooth powder was distributed *via* the infrastructure built up…In January 1983, old age

pensioners were included, netting in a further 1.9 lakhs. A year later ex-servicemen's widows became eligible for free meal.[8]

This and similar schemes of smaller magnitude were essentially calculated political investments made by the MGR regime with hardly any structural consequence for the economy. They were substantially financed by the poor themselves through tax revenue and had very little consequence in redistributing income and wealth from the rich to the poor.

In short, MGR's regime was one which enjoyed massive support from the poor, but served the interests of the rich.

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[1] The details in this section, including quotations, are largely drawn from Guhan, S. (1988). *State finances in Tamil Nadu: 1960–85: A review of trends and policy*. Working Paper 77, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Madras.

[2] *India Today*, 31 March 1989; *Aside*, 15 March 1989.

[3] *Aside*, 15 March 1989; *Aside*, 16 June 1988.

[4] *Thuglak*, 1 March 1987.

[5] *Indian Express*, 3 February 1989.

[6] Madras Institute of Development Studies, 1988: 345.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Harriss, Barbara. (1984). *Meals and noon meals in South India: Food and nutrition policy in the rural food economy of Tamil Nadu state*. Occasional Paper 31, School of Development Studies, East Anglia.

3

Likewise, the common people had very little to hope from the sphere of politics as well. Over the years, MGR's government acquired the distinction of being a brutal police *raj* (rule). I do not intend to chronicle the innumerable instances of police oppression in Tamil Nadu under MGR, but will only present a few stark examples by way of illustration.

During the late 1980s, the press throughout India carried reports of how the police were combing the North Arcot and Dharmapuri districts in northern Tamil Nadu and hunting down activists belonging to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). From 6 August to 28 December, the police killed 15 defenceless CPI (ML) activists in cold blood. In June 1981, they killed another four of them in the safety of police custody. Among the dead—Selvam, Rajappa, Perumal, Subramanian, Shanmugham, Balan, Manoharan, Kannamani, Dhanapal, Anbu, Saravanan, Chinnathambi, Dharman, Natarajan and Machakkalai—eight belonged to the scheduled castes and one to a scheduled tribe.[1] All of them paid with their lives for taking up the cause of farm labourers in these dry and backward districts, and for defying a few unruly and violent landlords. MGR defended his policemen in public without any compunction.

Table 1 Death Behind Bars in Tamil Nadu, 1977–82

Year	No. of Convicts	No. of Remand/ Undertrials	Total
1977	41	27	68
1978	34	20	54
1979	31	48	79
1980	24	41	65
1981	21	46	67
1982 (up to July)	9	9	18

Source: India Today, 30 September 1982.

When the Madras High Court passed strictures against the policemen for taking the law into their own hands and killing the CPI (ML) activists in faked encounters, it provoked the wrath of MGR. Disregarding the strictures of the judiciary, he decorated the police officers with medals for 'valour and distinguished service.'[2]

Police brutality became part of everyday reality for the poor in Tamil Nadu. A telling example is the case of the lock-up deaths in the state during MGR's rule. The data from 1977–81 shows that once every 10 days, an undertrial died behind bars (see Table 1). The fate of the convicts was also more or less similar.

This unchecked police rule in the state was granted legal sanction by the passing of the notorious Tamil Nadu Prevention of Dangerous Activities of Bootleggers, Drug Offenders, Goondas, Immoral Traffic Offenders and Slum Grabbers Act (1982). A unique invention of the AIADMK government, it was popularly known as the Goondas Act. Under the Act, the district collectors were given the power to detain anyone whom they suspected to be a *potential* violator of the law for a whole year without trial. The Act was used by the Tamil Nadu police to detain about 50 people on an average every month.[3]

MGR also constantly attempted to browbeat the media which exposed the corruption, administrative lapses and police oppression that had come to characterise his rule. In 1981, his government

amended the Indian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedures (Tamil Nadu) Act, 1981, and made *scurrilous and indecent* writing a cognisable offence punishable by a term of imprisonment, varying between two to five years. The provisions of the Act were used to harass newspapers, such as *Murasoli*, the mouthpiece of the DMK leader Karunanidhi, and *Malai Murasu*, a popular Tamil evening newspaper which too refused to toe the government's line.[4] Continuing the assault on the media, the AIADMK government, a few months before MGR's death, passed a bill to curb the screening of films critical of legislators and ministers. The bill was introduced in haste on the morning of 11 May 1987, the last day of the Assembly session, and was adopted in the evening—relaxing the rules of notice. The Act armed the government with powers to ban films which had been certified by the Central Board of Film Certification.[5] The bill was provoked by the success of a film, *Neethikku Thandanai*, scripted by M. Karunanidhi. The film was, as one would expect, quite critical of MGR's rule.

The AIADMK government also tried to suppress films and plays which espoused the cause of the poor. During the early 1980s, the Tamil Nadu police drastically censored the script of Komal Swaminathan's play *Thanneer*, *Thanneer* (Water, Water), as it portrayed the pitiable state of the rural poor in the hands of politicians. When the play was made into a film by K. Balachandar, a well-known and popular Tamil film-maker, the Tamil Nadu government urged the union minister for information, Vasant Sathe, to ban it. When the request went unheeded, the police pressurised the cinema theatre owners. The film disappeared from circulation within weeks, despite being exceptionally popular among the audiences. The fate meted out to Narsinga Rao's award winning film *Ma Bhoomi*, which dealt with the Telengana peasants' uprising

against the despotism of the Nizam of Hyderabad, was even worse. When the film was brought to the deltaic East Thanjavur, a region known for its communist-led peasant movements, the police, to begin with, threatened the theatre owners. Subsequently, they seized the copy of the film and refused to return it. They claimed that the copy was found in a dustbin![6]

In summing up this reign of terror on which the MGR regime thrived, it is worth quoting Menon:

> Justifiably, the state [under MGR] has gained particular notoriety for police atrocities—the officially sanctioned murder of 22 young men in North Arcot and Dharmapuri districts in the guise of 'encounters' and unleashing in those areas a virtual reign of police terror for the last five years; for the percentage of jail deaths in the country with respect to the number of detentions; for the highest number of people detained for more than one year (1.5 lakh) where the First Information Reports (FIRs) were not made available to the accused; for repeated attacks on local civil liberties' activists and associations…for the largest number of cases registered under I[ndian] P[enal] C[ode] 124-A (sedition)—over 300 in four years—which has been used to harass the poor, illiterate rural citizens, besides lawyers, publishers, journalists, students, a 10-year old boy and even a Bharatnatyam dancer.[7]

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[1] *Indian Express Magazine*, 10 January 1988.

[2] *Probe India*, August 1983.

[3] *India Today*, 1 January 1988.

[4] *India Today*, 30 September 1982.

[5] *Frontline*, 30 May 1987.

[6] *Probe India*, August 1983.

[7] Menon, M. Sadanand. (18 August 1985). The state of civil liberties in Tamil Nadu. *Indian Express*.

4

The reality of MGR's rule being such, one would expect the subaltern classes, given their position as victims, to have refused assent to MGR's politics. That is theory. In actuality, however, MGR enjoyed a stable, if not growing, popularity among the poor in Tamil Nadu throughout his tenure in office and earlier as well. The party founded by him in 1972, the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK),[1] polled a third of the total votes in every election and his followers, as we have seen, exhibited almost a personal bond with him. Thus, their political behaviour certainly did not conform to their actual interests and their objective life situations. The reasons are not far to seek.

The material conditions of the subaltern classes do not produce the immediate consciousness of their existence, since this consciousness can be effectively mediated by the ruling elite. Thus, it has been possible for MGR to pose real problems and offer imaginary solutions. An analysis of the specific modes of political mediation employed by MGR in producing this consent of the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu is, therefore, very much in order. The rest of this essay will analyse this process of political mediation.

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[1] Fearing that regional parties might be banned, MGR, during the national emergency (1975–77), rechristened ADMK and AIADMK.

5

Any understanding of the modes of political mediation employed by MGR will have to come to terms with his specific screen image, its constitution and its successful insertion into the cultural mosaic of the subaltern classes. One would also have to study its populist appeal as well as its ideological attributes. As I have noted in the introduction, MGR was, at one and the same time, a film star and a politician. His successful film career, which spanned 40 years and 136 films, earned him one of the world's largest fan followings. The All World MGR Fans' Association (*Akhila Ulaga MGR Rasigar Mantram*) has about 10,000 branches throughout Tamil Nadu and serves as the backbone of the AIADMK.[1] A number of AIADMK leaders, such as K.K.S.S.R. Ramachandran, Sengotayan, Anna Nambi and Tiruchi Soundarajan, attained their political prominence through the fans' associations. Remarkably, MGR himself claimed in public, '"Fans" associations and the party are not different'.

Before I discuss this close relationship between MGR's films and his politics, a theoretical digression to spell out the central analytical category employed in the rest of the essay, that is, the category of common sense, is necessary. The category of common sense was developed and elaborated by the well-known Italian Marxist and victim of Benito Mussolini's fascism, Antonio Gramsci. It was developed both as a critique of the Enlightenment tradition which held the world-view that the common people are bereft of much

sense and that of the pre-Enlightenment tradition which uncritically celebrated their world-view as philosophy.[2]

According to Gramsci, common sense is an ensemble of cultural presuppositions by which the subaltern classes make sense of the world. These cultural presuppositions or consciousness of the subaltern classes are pre-theoretical, unsystematic, inchoate and contradictory. In Gramsci's words, 'Its [common sense's] fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is.'[3] This consciousness is primarily dominated by sediments of elite ideologies:

> …this same group [subaltern classes] has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in 'normal times'—that is, when its conduct is not independent and autonomous but submissive and subordinate.[4]

However, common sense is not completely conservative. It carries not only elements of dominant/elite ideologies, but also contains progressive, autonomous elements. The latter asserts when the subaltern classes act against the elite *occasionally and in flashes*. In Gramsci's view, 'This is the healthy nucleus that exists in "common sense", the part of it which can be called "good sense" and which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent.'[5]

The contradictory character of common sense gives it a certain plasticity, that is, it can be selectively appropriated and reconstituted by different political forces for different political agendas. Given Gramsci's own political concerns, he suggested that any movement of the people should develop a critique of common sense by 'basing

itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that “everyone” is a philosopher’[6] and then by making the good sense or the progressive elements within the common sense *more unitary and coherent*. In other words, ‘…ideology in this meaning of common sense is not just an instrument of domination or a set of false beliefs. Rather, it is a terrain of struggle. It is the site on which the dominant ideology is constructed but it is also the site of resistance to that ideology.’[7]

The story of MGR is a telling instance of how dominant ideologies succeed in this terrain of struggle and produce consent among the subaltern classes. I explore this process by engaging with the screen image of MGR, and its embeddedness and insertion in the pre-existing common sense of the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu.

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[1] The first MGR fan club was organised by a Tamil Brahmin, Kalyanasundaram, in 1954. In his early career, he was selling books of film songs at cinema halls and doing odd jobs at coffee houses, and later got a job at the Sathya Studio in Madras, owned by MGR. About films, he confessed, ‘It took my mind off my miserable life, the way liquor erases pain for many people’ (see *Aside*, 1 August 1986).

[2] On Gramsci's category of common sense, see Cirese, Alberto Michael. (1982). Gramsci's observations on Folklore. In Anne Showstack Sasoon (Ed.), *Approaches to Gramsci*. London; Davidson, Alastir. (July 1984). Gramsci, the peasantry and popular culture. *Journal of Peasant Studies, II* (4); Patnaik, Arun K. (30 January 1988). Gramsci's concept of commonsense: Towards a theory of subaltern consciousness in hegemony process. *Economic and Political Weekly, XXIII* (5) and Saldanha, Denzil (30 January 1988). Antonio Gramsci and the analysis of class consciousness: some methodological considerations. *Economic and Political Weekly, XXIII* (5).

[3] Gramsci, Antonio. (1973). *Selections from the prison notebook*. New York, p. 419.

[4] Ibid., p. 327.

[5] Ibid., p. 328.

[6] Ibid., p. 330.

[7] Simon, Roger (April 1989). ‘Gramsci: A glossary of revolution’. *Marxism Today*.

6

There has always existed a symbiotic relationship between the medium of cinema and that of politics in Tamil Nadu. Before India attained independence from the British in 1947, Tamil films were carefully employed to evoke anti-colonial sentiments among the people. The very first full-length Tamil talkie, *Kalidas* (1931), invoked the name of the nationalist leader M.K. Gandhi and the nationalist slogan *Vande Mataram* in its songs. Although film songs were a favoured vehicle among the nationalist film-makers to campaign against the British, even the storyline of a number of films incorporated nationalist themes, such as the importance of swadeshi goods, the so-called ills of drinking and the need for the upliftment of *harijans*. These films had also exhibited icons of the nationalist movement—the spinning wheel and Gandhi cap—on the screen. This was often done in the course of mythological and historical films so as to bypass colonial censorship. For example, in *Sati Anusuya* (1937), the mythological Anusuya appeared on the screen with a spinning wheel; and in *Naveena Sarangathara* (1936), a historical film, people rebelling against an unjust king were shown in Gandhi caps.[1] However, the impact of nationalist films on the people was limited. This was so because during the pre-independence period, the '…rural population was not fully exposed to the impact of films as cinema halls were largely confined to townships.'[2]

But in post-independence Tamil Nadu, the situation was different. With the speedy electrification of rural areas under the Congress

rule, cinema halls and films became accessible to a substantial section of the rural population as well. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) appropriated films as a means for political propaganda in this favourable milieu. While this may sound like a truism since some amount of literature on the nexus between the DMK and films already exists, it still is important to detail the modes through which films inspired by the DMK ideology seek to intervene in Tamil politics. This happened primarily in one of the following three ways.

First, there have been films which have indulged in direct political propaganda. We can cite *Nalla Thambi* (1949), *Velaikkari* (1949), *Manthiri Kumari* (1950), *Marmayogi* (1951), *Sarvathikari* (1951), *Parasakti* (1952), *Sorga Vasal* (1954), *Nadodi Mannan* (1958) and *Thai Magalukku Kattiya Thali* (1959) as examples of overtly propagandist films inspired by the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK)[3] and the DMK. These films, in keeping with the early ideology of the DMK, propagated atheism, Tamil nationalism (which was often couched in anti-North and anti-Hindi rhetoric) and anti-Brahminism. The narratives of these films were peopled with womanising temple priests/religious men, helpless deities, usurious north-Indian moneylenders and villainous Brahmins. For instance, *Parasakti*, a film scripted by M. Karunanidhi, had shown a priest attempting to molest a young widow in the sanctuary of a temple. Although the film was subjected to vitriolic attacks by the Brahmin-controlled print media and the Congress party which was in power in Madras state at that time, it proved an instant success. It conferred star status on Karunanidhi and the hero, Sivaji Ganesan. In *Velaikkari*, scripted by one of the founders and much adored leaders of the DMK, C.N. Annadurai, the hero who was once an ardent devotee *converts* into an atheist, enters the sanctum of a temple and angrily kicks the

sacred objects and compares the deity to the rich who live on the sweat of others.[4]

The DMK's association with such propagandist films was not subtle. When *Nadodi Mannan*, in which MGR starred, completed a successful 100 days run, the party organised a huge colourful procession in Madurai to celebrate the event. The public meeting that followed the procession was addressed by eminent leaders of the party, including C.N. Annadurai. Addressing the meeting, MGR said, '*Nadodi Mannan* has been produced to show that the DMK is the party which is serving the people of this country.'[5] The film was so significant for the party that it found a place in the official history of the DMK. It recorded with a certain sense of pride: 'A man of honesty and high morals, MGR is committed to the basic ideology of the DMK…*Nadodi Mannan* produced by him portrays the state of affairs in the country. Apart from being a DMK propagandist film, it displayed the two coloured flag of the party on the screen.'[6] Karunanidhi wrote a poem on the success of the film.

Second, references to party symbols and colours and the anagrammatic usage of party leaders' names in the courses of songs and dialogues have been common features of DMK-style films. In *Rajakumari* (1947), the hero appears, during a stunt sequence, in a black shirt, thrilling the DK audience—the black shirt was their uniform. In *Nadodi Mannan*, both the DMK's black and red flag and its party symbol, the rising sun, appeared on the screen. In *Chakravarthy Thirumagal* (1957), an MGR starrer, the hero carried an unusual name, *Udaya Suriyan* which means the rising sun. Similarly, in another MGR film, *Puthiya Boomi* (1968), the socially conscious hero was named *Kathiravan* which again means the sun. An early film of MGR was titled *Kanchi Thalaivan* (Leader of Kanchi, 1963), an obvious reference to C.N. Annadurai, who hailed from a

small but historically important temple town, Kancheepuram, in northern Tamil Nadu.

Barnauw and Krishnaswamy, in their book on Indian cinema,[7] give several instances of how the DMK invested film dialogues with political messages:

> Man 1: The night is dark.
> Man 2: Don't worry! The *rising sun* will soon bring light.
> He: Believe me sister!
> She: I do, Anna, I do! The whole land believes you, and will follow you.[8]

In the casual selection of a sari:

> She: I always like a black sari with a red border.

In a similar fashion, film songs were also skilfully deployed by the Dravidian parties for political purposes. In *Idaya Kani* (1975), MGR, the hero, was shown to be singing:

> *All working people join hands*
> *and sing, 'the world is ours'.*
> *Think of the path*
> *to an egalitarian society.*
> *Follow Anna's path and prosper.*

To cite yet another example, in *Oli Vilakku*, again an MGR starrer, released in 1968 soon after the DMK came to power, the hero and the heroine sing and dance with the *narikuravas* (gypsies). In the course of the song, the *narikuravas* sing:

> *When a measure of rice*

is sold for a rupee,
Why should we go begging?
When the government is
on the side of the poor,
Why should we flout laws?

One of the most enticing promises of the DMK during the 1967 election campaign was to give the poor three measures (4.8 kilograms) of rice for a rupee. The party, however, after having come to power, modified this impulsive and impossible promise to one measure for a rupee and implemented it with obvious reluctance in the two industrial cities of Madras and Coimbatore for a short period.

Perhaps, the following description of a single MGR film, *Nam Nadu* (1969), brings out the definite political flavour of this genre of DMK films:

> …The film exposes administrative corruption and social evil and is given a particular DMK flair. MGR makes his first appearance wearing the party colours—a red shirt and black pants. He holds in his hands an open book with the pictures of both Gandhi and Annadurai on the covers. Throughout the film, the black and red combination appears. Annadurai's portrait hangs on the wall of almost every scene, accompanied by pictures of Gandhi, and in one song, Anna is specifically called ‘the South Indian Gandhi’. The huts of a slum fly the DMK flag. When MGR, the sacrificing government clerk-turned-politician in the cause of the poor, seeks election, the posters are in the red and black form of the DMK…With MGR's election victory a song proclaims, ‘The sun is rising, history is changing and now everything will be all right.’[9]

Finally, some of the DMK inspired films have been mixing documentary footage of party functions with shots of the actual films in question. In *Panam* (1952) and *Thangaratnam* (1960), during the course of dialogues, as an answer to a query, the scene shifts to

reveal documentary shots of the DMK party conferences. *Parasakti* (1952) also contains documentary shots of DMK leaders. In recent films scripted by M. Karunanidhi, he appears on the screen just before the actual film begins and provides an explanation about what prompted him to make the particular film.

Not only did the DMK have a set of scriptwriters, such as C.N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, A.K. Velan, A.V.P. Asaithambi and Murasoli Maran, and prolific film lyricists, such as Udumalai Narayanakavi and Kannadasan, but it had a battery of film actors too. Film actors beginning with the inimitable N.S. Krishnan (who, among other things, satirised Brahmins to the merriment of the DK and DMK cadres and whose funeral in 1957 was attended by as many people as that of M.K. Gandhi's), K.R. Ramaswamy, S.S. Rajendran and of course, MGR, have always drawn crowds, especially to party conferences. Moreover, several DMK leaders floated their own film companies, such as Mekala Pictures, Murasoli Films, Kannadasan Films and Emgeeyar Films. It was this intimate link between the DMK and the film world which provoked the Congress leader K. Kamraj to derisively characterise the DMK politicians as *Koothadigal* or mountebanks. In 1961, E.V.K. Sampath, a front ranking and much respected leader of the DMK, quit the party and founded the short-lived *Tamil Desiya Katchi* (Tamil Nationalist Party). One of his major complaints against the DMK was the importance given to film personalities in the party.

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[1] Baskaran, S. Theodore. (1981). *The message bearers: The nationalist politics and the entertainment media in South India, 1880–1945*. Madras and Narayanan, Aranthai. (1988). *Sudanthira poril Tamil cinema* (in Tamil). Madras.

[2] Sivathamby, Karthigesu (1981). *The Tamil film as a medium of political communication*. Madras.

[3] The DK, the progenitor of the DMK, was founded in 1944 by the irrepressible iconoclast Periyar E.V. Ramasamy.

[4] Narayanan, Aranthai. (1981). *Tamil cinemavin kathai* (in Tamil). Madras, pp. 418, 433. During the period 1949–56, A.P. Nagarajan produced a number of religious films with the obvious aim of countering the atheism of the DMK films. He also made films which explicitly attacked the DMK. In *Naalvar* (1953), for instance, he presented a DMK-type character as a lazy, unemployed person.

[5] *Anna*, 5 December 1958.

[6] Parthasarathy, T.M. (1973). *Ti mu ka varalaru* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 506.

[7] Barnauw, Erik and Krishnaswamy, S. (1963). *Indian films*. New York/London, pp. 171–72.

[8] C.N. Annadurai was popularly known as *Anna*, a name widely used by the DMK and the AIADMK to refer to him. It also means elder brother in Tamil. He addressed his male cadres as *Thambi*, which means younger brother in Tamil.

[9] Hardgrave Jr, Robert L. & Anthony C. Neidhart (1 January 1975). Film and political consciousness in Tamil Nadu. *Economic and Political Weekly, XI* (1), p. 34.

7

Although this interface between films and politics was where MGR thrived for the most part of his film career, it took him a fairly long time to achieve this profitable niche. Driven by poverty, MGR began his acting career as a child theatre artiste and joined the Madurai Original Boy's Company, owned by M. Kandaswamy Pillai. He acted, during the late 1920s, in nationalist plays, such as Krishnaswamy Pavalar's *Kadarin Vettri* and after a protracted struggle, he made his debut as a film actor, in 1936, in Ellis R. Duncan's *Sati Leelavathi*. *Sati Leelavathi*, which emphasised the importance of khadi and prohibition, was based on a novel by S.S. Vasan of Gemini Studios, well known for his commercial acumen and the stupendous film *Chandralekha* (1948). Apart from MGR, the film introduced N.S. Krishnan, M.K. Radha and comedian T.S. Baliah to the Tamil film audience.

During his early film career, MGR was compelled by circumstances to play minor roles in several films, including mythological ones. He appeared as Vishnu in *Dakshayagnam* (1938), as Indiran in *Prahalada* (1939), as Parameswarar in *Sri Murugan* (1946) and as Indirajit in *Seetha Jananam* (1947). He appeared for the first time as the hero in Jupitor Pictures' *Rajakumari* (1947), directed by A.S.A. Samy.

Only from the 1950s onwards was he seen in social roles on the screen, achieving recognition in this regard with *Tirudathe* (1961), a

runaway success. Henceforth, MGR's screen roles comprised several stereotypical characters, all of which constituted *the* MGR.

A characteristic MGR role was that of a working man attempting to combat everyday oppression. Thus, he had acted as a peasant, fisherman, rickshaw-puller, carter, gardener, taxi driver, quarry worker, circus artiste, shoe-shine boy, cowherd, etc. Many successful MGR films get their titles from these subaltern classes: *Thozhilali* (Worker, 1964), *Vivasayee* (Peasant, 1967), *Padakotti* (Boatman, 1964), *Mattukara Velan* (Cowherd Velan, 1970), *Rickshawkaran* (Rickshaw-puller, 1971) and *Meenava Nanban* (Fishermen's Friend, 1977). Even in films where he assumes dual roles—one as an elite character and the other as a subaltern—it is the subaltern MGR who is given prominence. A striking example is *Mattukara Velan* (1970), in which he acts both as a cowherd and a lawyer. The cowherd outsmarts the lawyer throughout. Aptly enough, the film was named after the cowherd. Similarly, in *Yenga Veetu Pillai* (The Son of Our Home, 1965), prominence was given to MGR, the worker, rather than to MGR, the heir of a landlord. While the former fights oppression and becomes the *Yenga Veetu Pillai* of the audience, the latter is portrayed as a coward, bullied and browbeaten by the villain.

These films are ostensibly about the oppression faced by the poor, with MGR being presented as one of them. By employing a carefully constructed system of *mise en scène*, the films celebrate the hero's subalternity and create an ambience that makes it possible for the audience to identify themselves with him. I shall cite here just one such element of the *mise en scène*: food, which is the central concern in the everyday struggle of the poor. In *Thozhilali* (1964), MGR, a manual worker, drinks gruel from an earthen pot and licks pickle from off his fingers. In *Kanavan* (1968), he asks for

Neerakaram (water in which the previous day's cooked rice has been soaked) in his wealthy wife's house. In *Ninaithathai Mudippavan* (1975), he eats *ragi dosai*, drinks *sukku kappi* (a hot concoction made of dry ginger, jaggery and water) and expresses his desire to have cold rice and cooked, low-grade cereal. MGR films endow these food items with a specific semiotic significance. All these food items are normally consumed by the poor, and are often a taboo for the rich. Thus, what is being presented here is a food-sharing structure that integrates MGR, the hero, with the subaltern masses/ audience. In *Mattukara Velan* (1970), MGR—a cowherd—masquerades as a lawyer. When wholesome food is served to him, he laps it up voraciously without bothering about upper class manners and smearing his face in the process. Again, in *Ninaithathai Mudipavan* (1975), a working class MGR tries to eat cooked peas with a fork and makes a mess at the table—drawing, of course, wild cheers from the audience.[1]

Along with food, details such as the design and colour of costumes are also used to define MGR as a subaltern on the screen. Here, a few words about the colours that pervade MGR films may be useful. Colours, such as black, red and blue, which are culturally classified as *hot*, dominate the multicoloured costumes of folk artistes during the performance of various rural art forms which belong to the cultural world of the rural poor.[2] Significantly, these are the colours—especially black and red which are also the colours of the DMK—that are overwhelmingly splashed in sequence after sequence. Thus, colours as much as food erase the difference between the hero and the subaltern masses/audience. Black and red are especially significant in the Tamil ritual milieu. As Daniel puts it:

> Black and red are [classified in contemporary Tamil culture as] hot, while green and white are usually thought of as cool, and never as hot. Red, in

> particular, by being associated with heat, is an auspicious colour with respect to fertility, procreation, and motherhood—and consequently marriage itself. Thus we find that a Tamil Hindu bride would never consider wearing white, which is an infertile, impassionate, cold colour; a colour of widowhood, social disinterest, marginality and even asceticism. The most popular colour of the bridal sari is red or shades of red…[3]

The social universe of MGR films is one of asymmetrical power. At one end of the power spectrum are grouped the upper caste men/women, the landlords/rich industrialists, the literate elite and, of course, the ubiquitous male—all of whom exercise unlimited authority and indulge in oppressive acts of power. At the other end of the spectrum can be found the hapless victims—lower caste men, the landless poor, the exploited workers, the illiterate simpletons and helpless women. Power is seen as all-pervasive and undifferentiated, while its victims are always already meek, beaten and share their common suffering. Thus, we have landlords who try to grab peasants' land (*Vivasayee*, 1967); the rural rich who wield whips on the farm hands (*Yenga Veetu Pillai*, 1965); moneylenders who bleed the poor dry (*Padakotti*, 1964); industrialists who dismiss workers at a whim (*Thozhilali*, 1964); avaricious men who covet the property of others (*Ayirathil Oruvan*, 1965; *Madapura*, 1962 and *Mukarasi*, 1966); city slickers who abandon rural girls whom they have made pregnant (*Thaer Thiruvizha*, 1968); casteists who do not allow their lower caste servants to enter their homes (*Nadodi*, 1966); and married men who desire other women (*Asai Mugam*, 1965; *Jenova*, 1953; *Mahadevi*, 1957 and *Vivasayee*, 1967).

The conflict between these oppressors and MGR, and its resolution, form the core of his films. MGR, the subaltern protagonist, in the course of the conflict, appropriates several signs or symbols of authority/power of those who dominate. In any social formation, where a wide spectrum of everyday life, such as speech, dress, body

language and food, is encoded and differentiated into signs of authority and deference, a point to which we shall soon return; this appropriation (of the signs of authority by a subaltern hero) becomes specifically significant. Three such signs repeatedly and prominently appear in MGR films. They are (a) the authority to dispense justice and exercise violence, (b) access to literacy/education and (c) access to women.

How does MGR on the screen usurp the authority to dispense justice and exercise violence?

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[1] For a brief but interesting article on how food is used as a prop to establish character and mood in European cinema, see, 'Food designers for films', *The Statesman*, 1 May 1987.

[2] Krishnan, M. Navaneetha & K.A. Gunasekaran (1982). *Karakattam* (in Tamil). Sivagangai. See also Shanmugasundaram, S. (1986). *Tirunelveli mavatta nattuppura padalgalil samudaya amaipu* (in Tamil). Bangalore, p. 256.

[3] Daniel, E. Valentine. (1987). *Fluid signs: Being a person the Tamil way*. Berkeley, pp. 189–90.

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MGR, the hero, during the course of the films, fights oppression as an individual belonging to subaltern classes. In these films '…the world of conflict exists as a world centred around the hero and his personal emancipation symbolises the emancipation from the social evil depicted.'[1] The odds the hero has to face and overcome in his struggle against injustice are not easily surmountable. However, MGR brings humanly impossible circumstances under control and establishes his version of justice. This was treated as a necessary ingredient in MGR films, following the success of S.M. Sriramulu Naidu's *Malaikkallan* (1954), which was remade in Hindi as *Azad* with Dilip Kumar in the lead role.

MGR's role as an individual dispenser of justice unfolds with particular emphasis on stunt sequences. These sequences, which give MGR starrers the flavour of *action films*, are an expression of his struggle against social evil and oppression: an unarmed MGR fights an armed adversary single-handedly or engages in fighting the landlords' numerous hirelings. In *Madapura* (1962), MGR, with his fractured arm in a sling, fights the chief of a criminal gang and in *Panathottam* (1963), he takes on a knife-wielding adversary with bare hands. In quite a number of films, MGR demonstrates his skill in fencing and *silambam,* which is a popular rural martial art in Tamil Nadu. These fast moving sequences are popular. MGR fans can recount effortlessly how many such sequences there are in different MGR films and provide graphic details of each one. Every time a

new MGR film was released, film magazines carried letters from his fans expressing their unbounded admiration for his fighting skills.[2] An MGR fan, rating *Padakotti* (1964) as the best of MGR films, wrote in a popular Tamil magazine, 'There has never been any dearth of valour in the films of the revolutionary leader [MGR]. None in the world could match him in fighting. It is even doubtful whether anyone of his stature would emerge in future. In this film, MGR introduces himself by demonstrating his skill in *silambam*. He proclaims his valour by saving his enemy's life when in danger and by entering the hamlet of his enemies and returning unscathed.'[3] The politics of MGR's cinematic role as an *action hero* have been succinctly summarised by Sivathamby:

> Whereas Annadurai and Karunanidhi provided the arguments for the whys of social oppression, MGR provided the how for a breakthrough. Thus the latter had more traces of wish fulfilment, which explain high percentage of fans identifying him as one who acts than as one who reflects, as one of deeds and not necessarily of mere words.[4]

MGR is not merely the subaltern protagonist who struggles against exploitation and oppression, but is also an invincible hero. In *Marma-yogi* (1951), MGR declares, 'If I aim, it will not fail; if it will fail, I will not aim'—a piece of dialogue which was popular among his fans. He only wins and with remarkable ease. He can bend crowbars (*Padakotti*, 1964) and maul ferocious tigers with his bare hands (*Gul-E-Bakaavali*, 1955). In fact, MGR's invincibility has become a byword in popular consciousness, as if MGR himself has acquired cultic powers. For example, in *Manal Kayiru* (1982), a non-MGR starrer, a cowardly character, inspired by MGR appearing with a whip in his hand in a poster of a film (*Yenga Veetu Pillai*), is suddenly transformed and beats up and defeats the villain.[5]

The hero's invincibility on the screen acquires a certain authenticity and appears credible not merely because of the dream-like experience that film watching essentially is, but equally because the subaltern consciousness most often dwells in the interface between the impossible religious myth and possible history. The following interview given by MGR, at the height of his film career, speaks for itself:

> *Reporter:* In films when you fight your enemies, you beat up 10 or 20 of them single-handedly and come out successfully…can anyone believe this?
> *MGR:* You look like a religious person…Do you believe in religious texts?
> *Reporter:* I have read them. I do believe them.
> *MGR:* In Mahabharata, the young Abhimanyu fights experienced warriors. He breaks difficult strategy and defeats enemies. If Abhimanyu can do it, film heroes like me can also do it.[6]

Importantly, with time, both the fight sequences and the fact of the hero's invincibility have become unavoidable for a successful MGR film. The constant presentation of MGR in such a mould has created a certain fixed expectation from his fans. In the words of MGR, 'Over the years, it has become necessary that my films should have fight sequences. Producers argue that my fans invariably expect such sequences. Moreover they say, it is the opinion of the film distributors as well.'[7]

This awareness, in fact, guided the making of MGR films. For instance, when the story of *Pasam* (1962) was narrated to MGR by T.R. Ramanna, a veteran film maker, MGR said the film would flop if he donned the role of the hero, as the hero dies at the end of the story. Ramanna ignored MGR's observation and went ahead with

filming the original story. The film flopped miserably at the box office.[8] Again, the story of *Pallandu Vazhga* (1975), a remake of the popular Hindi film *Do Aankhe Baara Haath*, required the hero to die at the end. Hearing of MGR's impending death on the screen, his fans became restive and the director of the film had to change the end to present an invincible and deathless MGR.

MGR, by constituting himself as one of the oppressed, simultaneously marks himself off from them by appropriating the right to dispense justice and employing physical violence, which, in real life, are the monopolies of the elite. He is, thus one of them, yet has chosen defiance. Cinematic licence grants him the *power* to dispense justice, and his audience accepts his invincibility even as they cross the limits that demarcate cinema from real life. Just as the impossible religious myth erases the specificities of life and legend, so the cultic power of MGR films causes cinema and reality to merge.

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[1] Sivathamby, Karthigesu. (1981). *The Tamil film as a medium of political communication*. Madras, p. 41.

[2] For example, see, *Cinema Kadir*, March 1970 and August 1971.

[3] *Thai*, 20 June 1982.

[4] Sivathamby, Karthigesu. (1981). *The Tamil film as a medium of political communication*. Madras, p. 38.

[5] Samuel, Stephen. (1983). Unpublished PhD thesis. *Film and politics in Tamil Nadu: 1947–1980*, University of Madras, Madras, pp. 272–73.

[6] Incidentally, MGR, during his youth, was an ardent fan of the swashbuckling heroes of Hollywood, such as Errol Flynn, John Barrymore and Douglas Fairbanks. See Manian. (n.d.). *Kaalathai ventravar: Puratchi thalaivar MGR in vazhkai kathai*. Madras (in Tamil).

[7] *Bommai*, January 1967.

[8] Narayanan, Aranthai. (1981). *Tamil cinemavin kathai* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 593.

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The second sign of the elite that MGR appropriates on the screen is education/literacy. In MGR films, education ceases to be a monopoly of the priestly classes or the rich. In *Padakotti* (1964), MGR is the lone literate fisherman in the whole fishing hamlet. In *Thazhampoo* (1965), he is the first postgraduate in the family of an ordinary plantation labourer. Unlike the rich, education does not come easily to the poor. They have to struggle to attain it. In *Thozhilali* (1964), MGR, a manual worker, spends endless nights studying and earns a degree at last. In *Panathottam* (1963) and *Naan Yaen Piranthaen* (1972), he pledges his modest house in order to acquire education. In *Kumarikottam* (1971), he works as a newspaper delivery boy, a gardener and a bearer in a restaurant to finance his studies.

In MGR films, the hero's use of literacy as a weapon of struggle against oppression is often contrasted with its use as a weapon of oppression by the elite. In *Padakotti* (1964), the much dreaded villain —an affluent fish trader—forces the poor and illiterate fishermen to put their thumb impressions on promissory notes—keeping them ignorant of their contents. But MGR descends on the scene, reveals the usurious terms of the promissory notes and saves them from the manipulation of the trader. In *Yenga Veetu Pillai* (1965), MGR—a literate labourer—exposes the landlord's evil plan to grab other people's property through fake documents. In *Mattukara Velan* (1970), MGR—an educated cowherd—lends his newly acquired

literacy to help locate a murderer, a task that eludes a well-trained lawyer. Thus, MGR delinks education from authority and knowledge from power. Literacy, hitherto a privilege of the elite, now becomes an instrument of subversion in the hands of the subaltern hero—a challenge to education as a sign of authority.

This appropriation of education as a sign of authority by the hero is significant as present-day Tamil society and, even more so, the MGR fans, are overwhelmingly illiterate.[1] This lack of literacy, during every one of its inevitable encounters with the written culture of the elite classes and the state, affirms the marginality of the subaltern classes. MGR films negate this marginality on the screen.

Education had always been a site of struggle for the activists of the Dravidian Movement against Brahmin hegemony. The priestly classes managed to hold on to power in spite of being a minority through their control over knowledge and its communication in Tamil society. Colonial educational policies had virtually confirmed this hegemony, which was, however, constantly challenged by the Dravidian Movement. The importance of learning as a political act has been emphasised in different ways by the DMK. As Sivathamby argues,

> …in the eyes of the average DMK followers, Annadurai is associated with learning. Most of the statues erected in his honour in various villages and towns of Tamil Nadu show him engrossed in reading a book…This image of Annadurai as a learned man, should be considered part of the democratic revolution initiated by E.V. R[amasamy] and symbolises perhaps the literacy development among the lower groups. Anna Paddipaham (Anna Reading/Study Centres) are a common sight in the villages and towns of Tamil Nadu.[2]

It is certainly not accidental that the leaders of the DMK/AIADMK took pride in their learning, and it was entirely logical that they came

to accept honorary doctorates as well deserved by them. While the Annamalai University conferred an honorary doctorate on M. Karunanidhi, the University of Madras conferred one on MGR.

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[1] Hardgrave Jr, Robert L. & Anthony C. Neidhart (1 January 1975). 'Film and political consciousness in Tamil Nadu'. *Economic and Political Weekly, XI* (1) and Sivathamby, Karthigesu (1981). *The Tamil film as a medium of political communication*. Madras, p. 44.

[2] Sivathamby, Karthigesu. (1988). 'Understanding the Dravidian movement: Problems and perspectives'. In *Kailasapathi ninaivedu* (Kailasapathi Commemoration Volume), Jaffna, p. 68.

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The third sign of authority which MGR recurrently appropriates on the screen relates to women. In a male-dominated society where the landlords can, and often do, easily rape peasant girls and have concubines as status symbols, access to and control over women's bodies functions as a sign of authority. Here, control over the men of subaltern classes is exercised, inter alia, by emphasising their inability to defend their women. MGR, on the screen, defies this norm which reproduces the subalternity of the lower classes/castes by portraying them as emasculate.

Before we deal with how MGR films handle this inequity, it is necessary to make a brief digression to see how, in present-day Tamil society, caste and wealth mediate man–woman relationships not only within the private sphere of the family, but also in society at large. The following details from a village in Tirunelveli district are eloquent enough instances of the sexual politics of caste/class in Tamil Nadu. In this village, as elsewhere, Adi Dravida (Dalit) women are regularly harassed and raped by a single family of intermediate caste Thevars.

These horrid tales of Adi Dravida women in Sankarankulam are best narrated in their own words:

Prema (18): About a week ago, I went out in the afternoon to gather firewood. Sankar Thevar's son Chinnathambi grabbed hold of my hand. I began to run and cry out. He chased me, caught hold of me and raped me under an udai tree. When I

told my mother she said that if we speak about this to others, our heads will be chopped off. So my mother took me to live in Tuticorin.

Manjula (19): My house is in front of the temple. Sankar Thevar's well is towards the south. He always used to whistle at me and I used to complain about this. Wherever I went, he was always trying to corner me. About three months ago, my parents had gone for a temple festival and I was alone at home. Later at night, he came into the house and raped me.

Rajaselvam (23): My husband and I were working in Sankar Thevar's house. My husband used to work in the field. I used to take his midday meal for him…One day, when I took the food, Sankar sent him away to a shop. Sankar told me to leave the food in the motor room and go. But I wanted to wait. Finally it was getting late so I went to leave the food. He followed me into the room, locked the door and raped me. I screamed. My husband returned and saw what happened. In the evening when my husband went to tie up the cattle, he was beaten up and his dead body was brought home in a cart…Sankar and his men took the body, poured kerosene on it and burnt it…Next morning they came and asked me to pay the money they had spent on my husband's funeral. I gave them my *tali* (wedding chain). They also took all the paddy I had. I lived alone for two months but they continued to harass me. So I went to my father in Tuticorin.[1]

In this social universe dominated by rapacious higher caste/class men, such as Sankar Thevar, the lower caste/class men fantasise about sexual conquest over upper caste/class women—as if such a conquest is in fact a conquest over the dominators themselves. For instance, one of the reasons for the 1989 caste riots at

Bodinayakanur in central Tamil Nadu was a provocative speech by John Pandian, an Adi Dravida leader who called upon the Adi Dravida youth to ask caste Hindu girls for marriage and, if refused, to use forcible means.[2]

In MGR films, we often find that the hero starts off as a poor man but ends up marrying a rich woman, or as a lower caste man marrying an upper caste woman. If powerful villains come in his way, it is the subaltern MGR who invariably succeeds.

In Jupitor Pictures' *Rajakumari* (1947), MGR as a humble villager wins the hand of a princess in marriage. In *Mattukara Velan* (1970), MGR marries the daughter of an affluent lawyer who had earlier thrown him out of his palatial house for being a lowly cowherd. In *Thaiku Thalai Magan* (1967), MGR, an automobile mechanic, ultimately marries the only daughter of a local landlord. In *Periya Idathu Penn* (1963), MGR turns the rural power structure upside down: as a bullock-cart driver, he marries the local landlord's daughter. In *Ayirathil Oruvan* (1965), MGR, a galley slave, marries a princess. In *Thazhampoo* (1965), MGR, belonging to the family of a plantation labourer, marries the plantation owner's daughter. The pattern is repeated in several other films, such as *Bhagdad Thirudan* (1960), *Panathottam* (1963), *Yenga Veetu Pillai* (1965) and *Kumarikottam* (1971).

In *Madurai Veeran* (1956), *Panam Padaithavan* (1965), *Nadodi* (1966) and *Nam Nadu* (1969), MGR's matrimonial alliances challenge and obliterate caste distinctions. In these films, a lower caste MGR performs the near impossible feat of marrying a higher caste woman.

In the same manner, when there is powerful competition for a particular woman between the subaltern MGR and others who are locally powerful, predictably MGR wins over the woman and marries

her. In *Padakotti* (1964), MGR, the fisherman, and a powerful and notorious fish trader fight over the village headman's pretty daughter. MGR, of course, succeeds in marrying her. In films such as *Pallandu Vazhga* (1975), *Ayirathil Oruvan* (1965), *Mahadevi* (1957), *Thaer Thiruvizha* (1968) and *Puthiya Boomi* (1968), MGR marries the desired woman after a fierce and intense struggle against powerful villains.

It is significant that in MGR films, the upper class/caste women always find a lower class/caste hero desirable. In this sense, MGR seems to grant women the *freedom* to fall in love and get married as they please, in spite of class/caste differences and familial opposition. This subversion of societal norms grants a certain notional freedom to women, and, at the same time, asserts the virility of the men of the subaltern classes.

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[1] For some of the press reports on the humiliation of Adi Dravida women in Tamil Nadu at the hands of upper caste men, see *Junior Vikadan*, 31 July 1985; *Junior Vikadan,* 25 September 1985; *Junior Vikadan,* 5 February 1986; *Junior Vikadan,* 26 March 1986; *Junior Vikadan,* 26 November 1986 and *Junior Vikadan,* 3 December 1986. See also Shanta (1984). ‘Women speak in Tamil Nadu’. In Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (Eds), *In search of answers: Indian women's voices from Manushi*. London, pp. 182–83.

[2] *Sunday Observer*, 24 September 1989.

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The three instances—right to dispense justice, control over education and access to women—are not the only ones where MGR as a subaltern hero appropriates the signs of authority of the elite. In subtler and surer ways, he likewise gains control over other signs of authority, such as dress, language and bodily gestures. While the rest of the poor, on the screen as much as in real life, submit to the rich with folded hands, MGR confronts them with remarkable ease and a certain elan, standing erect with arms akimbo. Unlike others, he refuses to tie the shoulder cloth around his waist (a sign of deference to authority), but instead uses it as headgear or leaves it across his shoulders (otherwise an exclusive privilege of the rural elite). The language that he uses is not one of submission, but of authority.

In a memorable sequence in *Periya Idathu Penn* (1963), for instance, MGR, the bullock-cart driver, confronts the landlord villain within the precincts of a temple. While the landlord is prostrating himself (his shoulder cloth around his waist as a sign of deference to the deity), MGR confronts him with arms akimbo, the shoulder cloth thrown over his shoulders. In *Rickshawkaran* (1971), when MGR, the rickshaw-puller, faces the villain in a lawyer's chamber, he sits in a chair facing him with crossed legs—a sign of disrespect to authority. In *Oli Vilakku* (1968), MGR, a kind-hearted thief, when brought to the police station for interrogation, makes himself comfortable in a chair in front of the fully-uniformed police officer without his permission, of

course. It is indeed this irreverence towards authority by means of usurping the signs of authority of the elite that mark out these sequences in MGR films and make them enormously popular.

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In the course of any MGR film, there are repeated dialogues and songs, which apart from rhetorically detailing, criticising and challenging social oppression assert that the successful fate of the hero is not just his, but could be that of anyone of the oppressed. These songs of hope, optimism and reassurance are popular among his fans and they blare out from loudspeakers whether at an AIADMK (earlier the DMK) public meeting, a marriage in a village or a colourful temple festival. Collections of these songs are also sold in the form of mass-produced low-priced books with the title *MGR Kolgai Padalgal* (MGR's ideological songs). I shall mention two such songs as illustration—one from an early film of MGR and the other from a later one. In *Malaikkallan* (1954), the hero was shown to be singing:

How long will they fool us
in this land of ours?

They pretend to be noble men
but swindle whenever possible.
In the garb of the devout
they trap the poor folk.

We'll open schools in every street
and see that there is none unlettered.

We'll teach many vocations

and banish starvation.

Spending days in happiness,
we'll gather knowledge.
Why do people starve and vegetate
in their own land?

Because they don't get even
a glimpse of the hoarded money.

Why do they keep yelling
'There is no God'?
Because He has not shown Himself
for too long.

Commenting on this particular song, a popular historian of Tamil films, Randor Guy noted, 'It was so popular among audiences and so many people began singing it in public that MGR decided that thereafter everyone of his films should have a similar song. His instinct proved correct as it happened. All such songs in MGR films later proved to be terrific vehicles for political propaganda…'[1] Similarly, in *Uzhaikkum Karangal* (1976), MGR, the hero, *sings*,

Toiling hands
Should rule tomorrow's world.
Revolutionary flowers
Should bloom all over the land.

We do our duty without fear,
And claim our due without hesitation,
Come join (me) comrades.

It is past
When ploughs burdened our shoulders
And scarcity stayed in our homes.

The time is near
When everything belongs to everyone.
The time of dawn is near;
Dharma is about to pronounce its verdict;
Never do the honest die.

The significance of these songs does not lie merely in their content which is of course in consonance with the overall themes of these films, but also in the fact that the actual authors of these songs, that is, the professional film lyricists cease to exist in the popular mind. And consequently, these songs are treated by the common people as the ideological statements pronounced by MGR, the actor–politician, himself.

There are at least two reasons why MGR was able to usurp the songs written by others and call them his own. First, it is due to the cinematic medium itself. To be more precise, it is the specific relationship between cinematic sound and image which gives the latter a lifelike authenticity:

> Sound lacks directionality in the vast majority of film; it comes from a single point in relation to the spectator. The source of the sound is then detected in relation to the image; if a figure on the screen is moving their [sic] lips when speech is heard, we assume that the sound is uttered from that point. Even when, for some reason, the loudspeaker is at the back of the hall rather than behind or very near the screen, the discordant effect produced is very short-term. The habit of expecting sound to issue from a point on the screen soon makes hearers discount the disparity of sound and image positions. They are discounted in favour of the image; the sound is imagined to be coming from the screen.[2]

Second, film music, particularly film songs on the Tamil screen, was in its earliest phase a reworking of themes and tunes from the musicals that featured in the vibrant Tamil drama. Stage artistes were more often than not chosen for their ability to sing and as cinema gradually gained prominence over theatre, the musical traditions of the latter were absorbed into the former. The form of cinema did induce several important transformations in the rendition of this music, but music was always communicated through the actor–singer, and lyrics were also written to suit the role donned by him/her. But as soon as pre-recorded music became technically feasible, demand for the actor–singer began to die out. Actors were now chosen for their looks, their *appeal*, and though songs continued to be sung, they were rendered by playback singers who later became stars in their own right.[3]

But the memory of the drama halls continues to haunt the film world, and dramas coexist with films as major mediums of entertainment in Tamil Nadu. Even though the actors do not sing their songs any more, it is generally believed that they do. The audience is only too willing to suspend its disbelief in this respect with regard to cultic heroes, such as MGR. MGR was not only an arch *Dravidian* political figure, but also in a sense the minstrel hero of bygone times. What is true of the songs is true of the dialogues delivered by MGR as well.

Although lyricists, such as Pattukottai Kalyanasundaram, a communist and Kannadasan, once a rationalist and a DMK activist, wrote lyrics for MGR films during the 1950s, MGR later groomed his own lyricists, such as Vaali and Pulamaipitthan. Both Kalyanasundaram and Kannadasan were poets in their own right, and their lyrics held their ground—over and above the cinematic situation as well as the hero's screen personality. But neither Vaali

nor Pulamaipittan could gain a following for themselves and had to have their songs sold as *MGR songs*. Interestingly, a head master of a school, inaugurating a government building at Kalakkad in Tirunelveli district, confessed in public that he had been teaching *MGR songs* as moral instruction lessons to his students![4] Thus, the hero's actions on the screen as well as the songs and dialogues were all treated as MGR's, and together they came to constitute the screen MGR.

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[1] *Aside*, 15 January 1990.

[2] Ellis, John. (1984). *Visible fictions: Cinema, television, video*. London, pp. 51–52.

[3] Baskaran. (1982). Film music conquers South India. *Media Development, XXIX* (1).

[4] *Indian Express*, 27 July 1986.

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Where and how does the screen image of MGR fit into the pre-existing cultural presuppositions or the common sense of the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu? It is in the heroic ballads which are dynamic elements of the subaltern common sense in Tamil Nadu that one may look for answers.

Heroic ballads are a living tradition among the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu. For example, the border area between Tiruchi and South Arcot districts is a country of dense cashew forests. Sometime in the recent past, in certain villages of this area, there existed a degrading custom—every woman had to spend her nuptial night with the village *Nattanmai* (headman). This custom was put to a violent end when Kodukoor Arumugam beheaded three notorious *Nattanmais*. Kodukoor Arumugam, the vigilante, by this act of protest, who elevated himself as a hero of the poor in the region was gratefully celebrated in these ballads.[1]

Throughout the Tamil countryside, there exists numerous ballads on such folk heroes. To name a few—Chinnanadan, Chinnathambi, Jambulingam, Muthupattan and the most popular, Madurai Veeran. They are remembered from generation to generation in popular heroic ballads.

Chinnathambi is a Chakkiliar (an untouchable caste which works with leather that is considered polluting). Lowly Chinnathambi accepted the local king's offer of a reward for venturing into the adjacent forests to hunt dangerous wild boars which were

depredating the local peasants' crops. His unparalleled valour launched him on a successful career which was traditionally denied to the Chakkiliars. He became the commander of the garrison, guarding the king's fort at Thirukkurunkuti. Driven by jealousy, the upper caste Maravars who were the traditional commanders of the garrison, murdered him. But the people from among whom Chinnathambi rose to power did not allow him to die. They immortalised him in ballads which are in circulation even now in Tirunelveli district in southern Tamil Nadu.[2]

The ballad on Chinnanadan is also in circulation in Tirunelveli district. Chinnanadan *alias* Kumaraswamy married his 2-year old cousin when he was 18 years. But he subsequently fell in love with a lower caste girl, Ayyamkutty, and refused to accept his cousin as his wife. Although he had to forego his family property as well as his standing within his caste group, he did not flinch from his resolve. He was murdered by his own kin. His wife and Ayyamkutty committed suicide. The cult of Chinnanadan is alive in at least four villages and there are shrines dedicated to him around the small town of Eral.[3]

The Madurai Veeran ballad and cult are very popular, especially in central and northern Tamil Nadu. Madurai Veeran, like Chinnathambi, was a Chakkiliar who eloped with king Bommanna's daughter and defeated his army single-handedly and with much valour. His hard-earned fame as a relentless warrior won him the admiration of the king of Tiruchirapalli, and he worked for him, combating the higher caste Kallar bandits. He recklessly flirted with the women of the royal household and finally managed to carry away the king's sweetheart, Vellaiammal. An incorrigible adventurer and violator of sexual and caste norms, Madurai Veeran was finally quartered on the orders of the king. He is not only remembered in ballads and through several hundred shrines dedicated to him, but

also through framed pictures showing him riding a horse. These pictures decorate toddy and arrack shops in Madurai and Ramanathapuram districts, which are frequented by the poor.

The last of the ballads that I would cite here is that of Muthupattan, a rebellious Brahmin. After discarding his sacred thread and removing his *kudumi* (strand of hair at the back of the shaven head, usually sported by Brahmins) which were signs of his upper caste status, he, like an Adi Dravida, skinned carcasses, ate beef and drank liquor—all these in order to marry two Chakkiliar sisters, Timmakka and Pommakka. This Brahmin-turned-Adi Dravida protected the cattle of his father-in-law from the marauding bandits, backed by the local landlords belonging to higher castes. He was, finally, deceitfully murdered by the bandits. Near Papanasam Dam, there is a temple dedicated to Muthupattan's memory.[4]

There are several other examples of such revered heroes of the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu who are remembered in ballads:

> The Katavarayan ballad is the reverse of Muthupattan; he is an untouchable who is seduced by and elopes with a Brahmin woman. He is later killed by caste prejudice. Kautalamatan is a Muslim youth who defends the rights of an untouchable woman against sexual harassments from higher castes and dies for it…Pallicilyamman is a tribal woman who comes down from the hills to meet her Hindu lover. They are both killed because they transgressed sex-caste norms.[5]

The common characteristics of these subversive tales of love and valour need no elaboration. In the words of Vanamamalai,[6] a well-known pioneer of folklore studies in Tamil Nadu:

> All the heroes…[of the ballads] are low caste men who protect crops (Chinnathambi), protect the cattle (Muttupattan), protect the rights of the lower caste women (Hanuma, Koutala Madan, Jambulingam), challenge sexual caste norms (Muttupattan, Chinnanadan), challenge the privilege of

> the higher caste groups and demand equal rights for the lower caste men with talent and skill (Chennanna & Lakshmanna).[7]

In keeping with the caste/class character of these ballads, those who narrate them also predominantly belong to the lower class/caste. Writing about them, Blackburn remarks, 'All [singers] are semi-professionals and sing only during the temple festival season (January to May); in the off-season they are agricultural workers, small tenant farmers or engaged in some other small-scale enterprise. The performers come from the low and middle level castes in the area…. and from some lower income families in the higher ranking Pillai caste…'[8] While these ballads are sung throughout the night during temple festivals, religious discourses are normally organised during the afternoons. The timing is significant because while the rural elite who are not tied to the fields could attend the religious discourses in the afternoons, the labouring poor who are detained in their work area during the day will be free to listen to these ballads only at night.[9]

These details about the text and the context of the heroic ballads, when read together with the points that have already been made about the screen image of MGR, will indicate that there exists a remarkable overlap between the celluloid MGR and the heroes of the folk ballads. Both in the ballads and the films, the subaltern heroes invert the pre-existing power structure by appropriating different signs of authority of the elite. In other words, MGR films speak a language which the people are already familiar with (that is, part of their common sense) and which they yearn to listen to again and again to escape their prosaic, oppressive, everyday existence.

This overlap between the ballads and the MGR films is, however, not a product of any direct appropriation of the ballads for filmic representation, though MGR did act as Madurai Veeran in one of his

early successful films (*Madurai Veeran*, 1956). Such a correspondence has, however, become possible since MGR films are located within the discourse of the DMK which has placed repeated emphasis on honour (*Maanam*) and its defence through valour (*Veeram*/*Maram*). Given its Tamil *nationalist* thrust, the DMK, at one level, linked honour with the purity of the Tamil language and the glory of the Tamils. Importantly, at another level, it also presented a communitarian ideal with certain caste/class equality as a feature of any society which has not lost its honour. Thus, within this discourse, MGR films portray the oppressed, restoring their honour through MGR, the actor figure.

Although the DMK invoked classical Tamil literary texts, such as *Purananuru*, *Thirukural* and *Silapathikaram*, to argue in the defence of honour as part of the continuing tradition of the glorious Tamil past, it is, as is evident from the heroic ballads, very much an element of the common sense of the Tamil subaltern classes as well. This is the context in which the filmic MGR could acquire the features of the home-grown folk heroes, who have always been and still are popular among the common people.

However, MGR films and the ballads diverge from each other on certain very crucial points, despite their commonalities. This divergence would help us locate the differences in the ideological emphasis of the films and the ballads, and the political work that MGR films do.

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[1] Although the report does not give details, it is obvious that the women, thus, degraded belonged to the lower castes/class households. Invariably, the *Nattanmais* belonged to the affluent, dominant castes. See *Junior Vikadan*, 9 September 1987.

[2] Vanamamalai, N. (1981). *Interpretations of Tamil folk creations*. Trivandrum, pp. 161–63.

[3] Ibid., pp. 160–61.

[4] Ibid., pp. 155–58.

[5] Blackburn, Stuart H. (1978). The folk hero and class interest in Tamil heroic ballads. *Asian Folklore Studies, 37* (1), p. 136.

[6] Vanamamalai, N. (1981). *Interpretations of Tamil folk creations*. Trivandrum, pp. 172–73.

[7] The same conclusions have been arrived at by other scholars also. For example, see Blackburn, Stuart H. (1978). The folk hero and class interest in Tamil heroic ballads. *Asian Folklore Studies*, *37* (1) and Lourde, Tey. (1979). Kathai Padalgalin Iyalpugal. In S.V. Subramanian (Ed.), *Tamil nattuppura iyal aayvu* (in Tamil). Madras.

[8] Blackburn, Stuart H. (1978). The folk hero and class interest in Tamil heroic ballads. *Asian Folklore Studies*, *37* (1), p. 175.

[9] Arokianathan, S. (28 September 1988). ‘Theru koothu yarukkaga?’ (in Tamil). *Dinamani*.

14

Before dealing with the divergence between MGR films and the ballads, we need to see in some elaboration how the everyday ethnography of present-day Tamil society is semiotically differentiated into signs of power and powerlessness, thus allowing the ruling classes/castes to practise certain politics of authority and discipline over the subalterns. This would help us understand why the subaltern classes have a reverential attitude towards the heroes of the ballads and MGR on the screen, both of whom usurp different signs of power from the elite, and, at the same time, abandon signs of powerlessness or servitude imposed on them.

The all-pervasive nature of power and powerlessness in Tamil society is well captured by Beck in her study of the Konku region of Tamil Nadu. She writes:

> …Food passes between some groups but not between others, and guests of a given community are invited to sit on the porch of some houses but in the courtyard of others. Ranking is also implied in the form of address used between groups, and by subtle body gestures that accompany conversation. For example, a man of one community may cover his mouth when speaking, or stoop slightly and look at the ground, while another from a caste that claims superiority to the first may stand erect, fold his arms on his chest, and look straight ahead. Adjustment in clothing can also serve as indicators of status. Women generally draw the end of their sari over both shoulders when in the presence of superiors. Men, similarly, lower their long skirt like vesti…so as to cover their calves when they wish to indicate deference.[1]

This is a generalised description by Beck. In everyday practices, these differentiations are much more elaborate, stringent and oppressive. Often, through a strictly enforced process of subordination and exclusion, the upper castes reproduce and highlight the subalternity of the lower castes.

A detailed study of Seekinankuppam village by Ramachandran, Shastry and Manoharan,[2] for instance, demonstrates the oppressive nature of this reality in all its perversity:

> The harijan labour is…subject to extreme social and cultural discrimination in Seekinankuppam. Until recently the women were compelled to be without blouses and any kind of ornaments. They had to wear sarees which do not reach below the knee. The landlords' attitude forced them to be shabby in appearance by not being allowed to comb or knot their hair. Any adornment like flowers or ribbons [is] forbidden. The harijans are not allowed to use brass vessels. Mud pots are a must to emphasise their lowly status in the village. To ask for food requires the use of the word 'kanji' (gruel) and not 'sadam' (rice).
>
> Women are addressed only in abusive language with the most obnoxious sexual connotation. Children are never to be sent to school. The only recourse for a harijan parent who wants his child to attend school is to have the child sent out of village, which few can afford.

The study moved on to cite the Union Home Ministry Report of 1979 on the condition of the Adi Dravidas in Tamil Nadu:

> In some places the harijans are not allowed to put on chappals (slippers) and wear shoulder cloth. In certain Panchayat bodies, the harijans are not allowed to take their seats but are made to stand while a meeting is in progress. In some cases, Panchayat meetings are not held at all with a view to avoiding attendance of the harijan members.[3]

In dealing with this widespread prevalence of feudal semiotics in Tamil Nadu, one needs to bear in mind at least three points.

First, these practices are prevalent not only among the Hindus as generally believed, but also among the practitioners of other religious faiths. Thus, caste considerations override religious differences. Demel's study of the social relationship between the Vanniar Christians and Adi Dravida Christians in Tiruchi district has brought out how all the caste inequities that are practised by the Tamil Hindus are true among the Tamil Christians as well.[4] There are separate churches, burial places and pews within the churches for Adi Dravida Christians in different parts of Tamil Nadu, as elsewhere in India.[5]

Second, even economic prosperity does not mean automatic freedom from such humiliating caste-based oppression. A stark example of this is the recent story of the Adi Dravidas in Meenakshipuram, a small prosperous village in Ramanathapuram district, embracing Islam as a means to social honour which was denied to them as Hindus. In this village, appropriately renamed Rahmatnagar, the Adi Dravidas had access to land, education and above all to government employment. But this economic prosperity did not give them freedom from caste oppression, systematically indulged in by the higher-caste Thevars. Among other things, they were served tea in separate cups in hotels and were not allowed to sit in buses when the caste Hindus were there in large numbers. To escape this social degradation, they embraced Islam, though it cost them heavily in terms of several government concessions, such as free education up to the post-matric stage, scholarships from the union and the state governments, quotas in premier educational institutions, 18 per cent job reservations and free pattas of land.[6]

Third, class relations are mediated as much as are caste ones, and reproduced through such practices. This is understandable as there is more or less a homologous relationship between caste and

class in Tamil Nadu, as elsewhere. Ramaswami, for instance, in her study of workers in the textile mills of Coimbatore city, notes:

> Many mills give gifts for regular attendance, good work, long years of service and so on. Workers are apt to look at these as paternalistic gestures which emphasize their status inequality. As a woman worker remarked, 'we have to bow down before the *Mudalali* (proprietor) to receive what is only our due.'[7]

She further notes, 'In many of the mills, the workers would not be permitted to sit in the presence of even a low management official.'[8]

Given the ubiquitous nature of this powerlessness of the subaltern classes, institutionalised through codified behaviour and naked violence, it is no wonder that the heroes of the folk ballads and MGR on the screen were popular among them. They in their own ways turn the iniquitous world upside down and usurp those normally elusive signs of authority.

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[1] Beck, Brenda E.F. (1972). *Peasant Society in Konku*. Vancouver, p. 155.

[2] Ramachandran, Shastry & K. Manoharan. (1981). *Agricultural Labourers in Tamil Nadu*. Delhi: Lokayan Reports and Papers, p. 18.

[3] Ibid., p. 21. See also the following: Den Buden, J.H.B. (1979). Social stratification as expressed through language: A case study of South Indian village. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (New Series), *13* (1), January–June; Muthiah, E. (1986). *Nattuppura maruthuva manthira sadangukal*. Sivagangai (in Tamil); Naidu, V. Chandrasekara. (1988). *Some aspects of agro-economic transformation in Tamil Nadu—A case study of Enathimalpakkam village*, Working Paper 86. Madras: Madras Institute of Development Studies, pp. 119–20; Good, Anthony. (1983). A symbolic type and its transformation: The case of South Indian ponkal', *Contributions to Indian sociology* (New Series), *17* (2), July–December; and Ramasamy, G.K. (1979). *The MGR mantrams: A study in political sociology*. Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation. Bangalore: University of Bangalore, pp. 104 and 108.

Several press reports also bring out this fact. See, for instance, *Junior Vikadan*, 25 September 1985; *Junior Vikadan*, 23 October 1985; *Junior Vikadan*, 21 May 1986; *Junior Vikadan*, 23 November 1988 and *Junior Vikadan*, 3 May 1989.

[4] Demel, M.X. Poornam. (1988). Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation. *Caste discrimination against Christians of scheduled caste origin within Christian communities: A study of two villages in Tamil Nadu*. Chidambaram: Annamalai University.

[5] Pandian, M.S.S. (1985). State, Christianity and scheduled castes. *Economic and Political Weekly, 20* (42).

[6] *Indian Express*, 12 April 1981; *Indian Express*, 25 May 1981 and *Indian Express*, 25 June 1981.

[7] Ramaswami, Uma (1983). *Work, union and community: Industrial man in South India*. New Delhi, p. 126.

[8] Ibid., p. 68.

15

Let me now return to the question of how the heroic ballads diverge from MGR films and what is the ideological substance of this divergence.

For at least two reasons, the heroic ballads constitute a progressive element or *good sense* in the ambiguous and contradictory mosaic of the common sense of the subaltern classes. First, in a social universe where common people's lives are constantly and inescapably disrupted by upper class/caste-instigated adventures, such as crop destruction, denial of irrigation water, dispensation of arbitrary justice and violation of peasant girls' modesty, the people would normally aspire towards a condition of stability and security in their everyday lives. Given these circumstances, if people aspire for adventures, these are adventures carried out on account of their own free will to achieve what they consider just.[1] Thus, the aspiration of the subaltern classes that is inscribed in the popularity of the heroic ballads is an aspiration to create a just world of their conception.

Second, Madurai Veeran, Muthupattan, Chinnanadan and others, in their violent and unjust deaths, affirm their essential humanity. And this defiance of established norms and vindication of a common humanity have endeared them to the subaltern classes ever since. This is again a reason why heroic ballads are part of the *good sense* of the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu. Although the ballads present

the heroes as attaining divinity after death, the emphasis is most often on the undeserving nature of their deaths. As Blackburn notes:

> The manuscript [of the ballad is]…. rarely read to the end…In fact, the second half of the narrative is normally omitted altogether. Instead, the singers build their performance to a climax at the death of the central character, when the possession dance enters its most intense phase.[2]

The ballad-like MGR films are bereft of this progressive counter-hegemonic content. Here, one should remember that cinema, especially the Tamil commercial cinema, follows a linear narrative sequence with the beginning rising to a climax and dovetailing into a neat finish. In these closed narratives, contradictions are ironed out rather than their intensification being allowed to rupture the narrative. In MGR films, the closure is such that a neat solution is offered for the injustice *within* the moral economy of the system itself. In other words, the subaltern protagonist in the film, that is, MGR, establishes what is considered to be just *within* the system, and thus reaffirms and vindicates it instead of developing a critique of it. It is, thus, a world of transformed exploiters with untransformed property and power relations.

In *Yenga Veetu Pillai* (1965) and in *Vivasayee* (1967), two successful MGR starrers, the heartless landlords eventually turn into acceptable, *good* landlords—but landlords, all the same. In *Ayirathil Oruvan* (1965), the pirate chief, who oppresses the poor, undergoes a change of heart and even offers to abandon his chieftainship. But MGR, an indigenous physician-turned-political rebel, returns to his native vocation leaving the position of the pirate chief undisturbed. In *Nadodi* (1966), the rich casteist, who plays the pretentious role of a social worker for the outside world, finally gives his daughter in marriage to MGR, a lower caste man. In *Chandrodayam* (1966), the owner of a scurrilous newspaper, appropriately named Duriyothanan,

realises, with the hero's mediation, the need to change the content of his newspaper and the villainous landlord *regrets* his past and marries the woman whom he has earlier raped. In *Thozhilali* (1964), the private bus company owner, who dismisses workers at his whim, eventually leads a workers' cooperative. In a particular sequence in this film, when the dismissed workers shout slogans against the owner, MGR patiently corrects them, 'Don't shout "down with the owner", but ask him to reform himself!' Even after he loses all his property and joins the workers' cooperative, MGR addresses him, preserving all his past loyalty as a worker, as *mudalali* (proprietor).

The moral economy of the system is reaffirmed through a different mode in films where MGR appears in the role of an elite hero. Here, he often plays the role of a willing renouncer of wealth and status. In *Naan Anaiyittal* (1966), MGR constructs hundreds of houses on his own land and asks the poor to occupy the land and the houses. In *Nadodi* (1966), he gives away his plantation to the workers. In *Idaya Kani* (1975), he divides the profit from his prosperous plantation equally between himself and the workers. In *Naam* (1953), MGR, a young man propagating rationalist ideas, retrieves his landed estate from the villain's unlawful possession and happily gives it away to the poor in the village. In *Idaya Kani* (1975), a comic character in the film, as a reply to a question—'Whose plantation is it?'—answers, 'It is the plantation of the *one who gives*', and MGR reprimands the workers for calling him the owner.

MGR's role on the screen as a renouncer often goes beyond the material sphere. For the sake of the underdogs, he often renounces his upper class status. If a land-owning and highly educated MGR drinks gruel from the mud pots of farm hands in *Vivasayee* (1967), in other films, such as *Yenga Veetu Pillai* (1965), *Idaya Kani* (1975), *Naan Anaiyittal* (1966), *Asai Mugam* (1965), *Pallandu Vazhga*

(1975), *Puthiya Boomi* (1968) and *Netru Intru Nalai* (1974), he renounces his status as a wealthy man and marries a working class woman. In *Puthiya Boomi*, MGR, a socially conscious doctor, refuses the hand of his own rich cousin and chooses to marry a simple tribal woman instead. In *Netru Intru Nalai*, of the three women who are in love with him, MGR marries the one who works as a humble sweeper. In *Navaratnam* (1977), though no less than nine women enter his life, he marries only a lower caste woman. Furthermore, in films such as *Rickshawkaran* (1971), *Kumarikottam* (1971), *Thazhampoo* (1965), *Thozhilali* (1964), *Kanavan* (1968) and *Thanipiravi* (1966), his status as an educated person does not come in the way of doing his manual work and taking up the cause of the poor.[3]

The notion of the renouncer as a respectable figure that permeates the subaltern common sense, is a sediment of elite ideology. As Chakrabarty[4] points out in a slightly different context:

> …an appeal to the idea of sacrifice was really an appeal to the power that flowed from inequality. In order to be able to make sacrifices one needs to possess, he who did not possess could not sacrifice. The glory of the renouncer belonged to the 'possessor'; to talk of sacrifice was to talk of possession, and hence of power.[5]

Thus, glory in MGR films is for the hero, the *possessor*, and not for the dispossessed (read as audience). This is indeed the reverse of what one finds in heroic ballads.

In short, MGR represents on the screen the rebellious folk heroes in an ideologically devalued form. Instead of defiance, it is deference to elite values that MGR, as hero, propagates through the medium of cinema, while retaining a veneer of subaltern protest.

The effort to change the radical content of the ballads is a somewhat regular process, and such changes are often made by

means other than those of cinematic intervention. In this regard, Vanamamalai[6] cites a revealing instance. In the recent recitals of the Muthupattan ballad, his wives, it is narrated, are Brahmin girls brought up by a lower caste Chakkiliar. Unlike the original ballad, they are no longer presented as girls belonging to the Chakkiliar caste. On enquiry, it was found that Muthupavalar of Kallidaikurichi who sings the ballad was pressurised by upper caste Brahmins and Vellalars to change the content of the ballad. Similarly, there are Puranic insertions in ballads which portray the lower caste Madurai Veeran and Katavarayan as Brahmins.[7] These changes, subtly introduced by the elite over time, transform and recreate the ballads and neutralise the challenges to the caste system and the authority of the upper castes. One must note that ballads are, essentially, oral narratives that stand to be transformed over time, often reflecting the reconstituted social milieu. Thus, they are open ended and liable to infinite reinterpretations. MGR films are one such reinterpretation—importantly, a conservative one.

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[1] For an elaboration of this argument, see Gramsci. (1985). *Selections from cultural writings*. London, pp. 372–74.

[2] Blackburn. (1986). Performance makers in an Indian story-type. In Stuart H. Blackburn & A. K. Ramanujam (Eds), *Another harmony: New essays on the folklore of India*. Delhi, pp. 176–77.

[3] A self-sacrificing MGR takes murder charges on himself on behalf of others charged with murder in *Oli Villakku* (1970), *Madapura* (1962) and *Naan Anaiyittal* (1966).

[4] Chakrabarty, Dipesh. (1984). Trade unions in hierarchical culture: The jute workers of Calcutta, 1920–50. In Ranajit Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian history and society* (Vol. III). Delhi, pp. 149–50.

[5] What Stanley writes in her introduction to *The diaries of Hannah Cullwick: Victorian maidservant* is significant here:

> …chivalry depends upon and derives from inequalities in power, privilege and material position and the resulting image of the social groups involved. It is an important way of oppressing people, because at the same time, it denies the existence of oppression under the appearance of service to the oppressed groups. [See Stanley, Liz (Ed.) (1985). *The diaries of Hannah Cullwick: Victorian maid-servant*. London, p. 11.]

[6] Vanamamalai, N. (1981). *Interpretations of Tamil folk creations*. Trivandrum, p. 187.

[7] Blackburn, Stuart H. (1978). 'The folk hero and class interest in Tamil heroic ballads'. *Asian Folklore Studies, 37* (1), pp. 140–43.

16

The reconstitution of heroic ballads is possible because the common sense of the subaltern classes is largely contaminated by the sediments of elite ideologies, and, given its contradictory character, it contains both conservative and progressive elements. For instance, there are folk songs in rural Tamil Nadu which adulate the *good* landlords. To cite one such song, 'How many workers? Hundred workers, sixty-two workers, work on Avudai Thangam's farm. The crowd of workers is a feast to the eyes. Avudai Thangam enlists 50 workers, calls each one by name and pays them generously.'[1] Significantly, even within the heroic ballads, one can read elements of such elite values. This is quite evident in the fact that the subaltern protagonist of the ballad is often believed to be of divine origin (as in *Aivar Raja Kathai*), the rulers are treated with adulation (as in *Kattabomman Kathai*) and the protagonist portrayed as distinct in terms of valour and looks.[2]

But this is not all. The subaltern classes give assent to the reconstituted narratives since, as far as they are concerned, fragments of their reality are presented in these narratives. Besides, the speedy and effective dispensation of justice and the redressal of affliction allows a measure of vicarious pleasure to creep into their otherwise impoverished lives.

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[1] Vanamamalai, N. (1981). *Interpretations of Tamil folk creations*. Trivandrum, p. 101 and Alagappan, Aru (1973). *Nattupura Padalgal: Thiranayvu*. Madras (in Tamil).

[2] Marx, A. (1985). Foreword. In G. Kesavan (Ed.), *Kathai padalgalum samugamum* (in Tamil). Kumbakonam, pp. 18–19.

17

In the previous chapters, I have dealt with the thematic divergence between the heroic ballads and MGR films, and the ideological connotations of this divergence. The question is, how MGR, who is represented on the screen as ideologically conservative, could emerge as a hero for the whole of the Tamil-speaking area, whereas the heroes of the ballad have remained localised without any pan-Tamil appeal.

First of all, the elite who have the resources will not, for reasons of class interest, popularise the heroes of the ballads. Blackburn notes:

> Because the nature of his [the folk hero's] heroism earns the veneration of lower caste people, the local hero will not be patronised by courts, nor the cult of the court. This means the range of his ballad will not extend beyond the local areas.[1]

This understandable refusal by the elite is accompanied by a selective appropriation of folk traditions that has carefully distilled away the defiance and bravado of folk heroes to project a non-subaltern figure as the quintessential pan-Tamil hero.

An example of this kind of hero, favoured by the political elite in Tamil Nadu, is Veerapandya Kattabomman. Kattabomman, a small-time feudal chieftain in the dry tracts of Panchalankurichi in southern Tamil Nadu fought the British in his own interests and was eventually executed at Kayatharu on 17 October 1799. The elite in Tamil Nadu have made this non-subaltern a hero of the whole of the Tamil-speaking area. The well known film star Sivaji Ganesan and the film

producer B.R. Pantulu erected a memorial for him at Kayatharu in 1970.[2] In 1974, the DMK government renovated the ruins of Kattabomman's mud fort in Panchalankurichi at a cost of ₹7 lakhs.[3] Every year, a Kattabomman festival is organised at Kayatharu with state patronage and during the festival, various forms of folk art depicting Kattabomman's life are performed. B.R. Pantulu produced a historically inaccurate and grandiose film on the life of Kattabomman (*Veera Pandya Kattabomman*, 1959) with Sivaji Ganesan in the lead role. The film was popular among the Tamil audience, and for his performance Sivaji Ganesan bagged the best actor award at the Afro-Asian Film Festival held at Cairo, in 1960.[4]

Similarly, the elite in Tamil Nadu projected MGR, the actor figure, who did not have the radicalism of the folk heroes, as a pan-Tamil hero. This was made possible through the technology of the filmic form itself, as also the political lineage granted to MGR by the DMK's support. In other words, unlike the folk heroes who are at a disadvantage in that they cannot reach a wide audience, MGR had the elite-controlled medium of cinema at his disposal.

To understand the role of cinema in projecting a particular representation of MGR and its effectiveness in reaching a wide audience, one has to analyse two aspects: (a) The social context of cinema as a medium of communication in Tamil Nadu as compared to popular forms of the performing arts and (b) the popularity of cinema as a form of *entertainment* in the state.

Cinema as a medium of representation is *relatively democratic* in the Tamil cultural context. Cinema tickets being inexpensive, it is possible even for the poor to watch a film once in a while. What is more significant is that the seating arrangement within any cinema hall is not according to one's caste-based social status, but according to whether one can afford a ticket or not. This is in sharp

contrast to the performing arts in rural Tamil Nadu (and elsewhere in India) in which the order of seating of patrons is done hierarchically depending on one's caste-based social position. For instance, during *Therukoothu* (indigenous Tamil folk theatre) performances, the lower castes are still made to sit at the outer fringes, affirming their subaltern status.[5] In this sense, 'The cinema hall was the first performance centre in which all the Tamils sat under the same roof. The basis of seating is not on the hierarchic position of the patron but essentially on his purchasing power.'[6]

Among other things, the two factors—the affordability of witnessing a spectacle on the screen and cinema halls as *social equalisers* of sorts—have been instrumental in making films a popular medium of entertainment for the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu. The popularity of cinema can be gauged from the fact that most of the village monographs brought out by the Census of India (1961) record watching films as the most widespread entertainment among the rural people in the state. In the census volumes, one comes across alarmist statements such as: 'With the remarkable growth of cinema industry in South India, particularly in Madras state [the present Tamil Nadu], the popularity of festivals is bound to decline with passage of time.'[7] Further, 'Nowadays…folk songs are gradually yielding place to the songs of motion pictures. If this trend continues—and it is sure to continue—these folk songs may be completely blotted out from the minds of the people in the course of the coming one or two decades.'[8] While folk songs and other forms of folk entertainment do continue to hold their own stand in rural Tamil Nadu, it is true that they are heavily influenced by films,[9] and that films are here to stay as the most popular medium of entertainment for the people.

The significant proof of the popularity of films, especially MGR films, comes from the fact that watching them has become almost a ritual in itself. The ebullient crowds gathered to watch MGR films burn camphor before larger-than-life cut-outs of the hero and distribute buttermilk and water to the populace—as one would do before a Hindu deity during temple festivals. It may be noted here that it is indeed a thin line that divides entertainment from ritual and various kinds of social festivities in rural Tamil Nadu.[10] MGR films are located in this interface between entertainment and ritual.

In addition, the proliferation of cinema halls in Tamil Nadu is quite extensive. The state has the largest number of cinema halls in the whole of India, second only to Andhra Pradesh. On 3 March 1986, Tamil Nadu had a total of 2,153 cinema halls out of which 320 were temporary halls.[11] These temporary cinema halls, which are located in rural and semi-urban areas, are usually *touring talkies* that are shifted from one place to another over time. The prices of tickets in these makeshift cinema halls with corrugated iron sheet roofs and sand-spread floors are very nominal. The *touring talkies* are almost exclusively visited by the rural and semi-urban poor, while the rich, given their social status, go to the nearby town to watch films in *proper* cinema halls.

To sum up, throughout Tamil Nadu, people have access to cinema halls and cinema is a popular medium of entertainment among the people, especially the poor. While heroic ballads could circulate only within limited localities due to the hostility of the elite and the non-availability of such elite-controlled mediums, such as cinema, films could present MGR, who had distilled away the radicalism of the ballads, to a wider audience throughout the state. MGR, thus, emerged as a pan-Tamil folk hero, as Madurai Veerans and Muthupatans remained undeservingly localised. As if to underscore

his status as a modern-day folk hero, some of his supporters staged a dance drama about his life on 15 July 1987, that is, while he was still alive. This performance, held in Madras, carried a title of promise borrowed from a poem of Bharathidasan, a radical poet identified with the Dravidian Movement *Puthiyathor Ulagu Cheyvom*—let us make a new world.

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[1] Blackburn, Stuart H. (1978). 'The folk hero and class interest in Tamil heroic ballads'. *Asian Folklore Studies*, *37* (1), p. 146.

[2] *Cinema Kadir*, August 1970.

[3] Karunanidhi, M. (1975). *Nenchukku needhi* (Vol. I) (in Tamil). Madras, pp. 421–23.

[4] In the Tamil context, one can argue that the popularity of Kattabomman as a historical personality underscores the fact that elite values do permeate popular consciousness. There are half a dozen or so ballads on feudal Kattabomman, and these are quite popular among the common people.

[5] Arokianathan, S. (1988). 'Theru koothu yarukkaga? (in Tamil)', *Dinamani*, 28 September.

[6] Sivathamby, Karthigesu. (1981). *The Tamil film as a medium of political communication*. Madras, pp. 18–19.

[7] Nambiar, P.K. & K.C. Narayana Kurup (1968). *Fairs and festivals*, Census of India 1961. Vol. IX, Part VII-B, Madras, p. 1.

[8] Office of the Registrar General (1967) *Census of India 1961*. Vol. 9, Madras, Part 6, Sirumalai, Madras: Manager of Publications, pp. 196–97.

[9] Krishnan, M. Navaneetha & K.A. Gunasekaran (1982). *Karakattam* (in Tamil), p. 47 and Padmanabhan, S. (30 July 1989). The musical bow…flexible enough. *Indian Express*.

[10] The following excerpt from Arokianathan brings out this aspect of Tamil cultural reality in colourful detail:

> Rural people do not treat *Therukoothu* as entertainment; they treat it as a temple-related ritual. When an actor appears on the stage dressed as Draupati, the audience do *deeparadanai*. During the *Arjunan Thapas Koothu*, women stand close to the *Thapas* tree with much reverence… During *Pakadai Thuyil*, when Draupati is disrobed, people say "Govinda,

Govinda" (in anguish). In *Krishnan Khoothu*, when Krishnan takes a fierce incarnation, people slap their cheeks and say "Govinda, Govinda" and some of them even ecstatically dance as if possessed. In the Vikravandi area, during the enactment of *Ramar Pattabishekam*, people offer pongal before the actors on stage as done before deities. [Arokianathan, S. (1988). 'Theru koothu yarukkaga? (in Tamil)' *Dinamani*, 28 September.]

[11] *Screen*, 19 December 1986.

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The screen image of MGR that we have dealt with so far is that of the *public sphere*, the sphere that is historically and culturally constituted as the exclusive preserve of men. But the subalternity of women is reproduced not merely by their exclusion in the *public sphere*, but more acutely and more often in the *private sphere* of the family which is culturally treated as women's. This separation of the public and private spheres between men and women, respectively, pervades everything in Tamil society, including fiction and folk forms. Referring to Tamil fiction, Lakshmi writes:

> …The outside-nature-symbolisms are for men and the inside-kitchen-symbolisms are mostly meant for women. The nature and kitchen symbolisms [in Tamil fiction] are derived out of the Tamil film where after a burst of emotion the camera would cut to the roaring sea or if it is a woman, to the rice pot or the milk vessel…[1]

The same is true of folk art forms. 'The *puram* [public/exterior] genres, performed in public mostly by men, contain personal names, historical and communal events, especially battles; the *akam* [domestic/interior] genres, performed by women in or around the house, describe generalised human (especially familial) relationships.'[2]

Given this separation of spheres, one would logically expect the filmic representation of MGR, which dwells predominantly in the public sphere, to appeal more to men than to women. However, MGR's following consisted, in the majority, of women. This calls for a

separate analysis. MGR films produce certain moments of *freedom* for a female audience, which is denied to them in their oppressive everyday lives. Let me elaborate these moments of *freedom*.

First, in these films, marriage ceases to be a site of parental authority mediated by caste and class. The heroine marries the man not of her parent's choice, but of her own. And the deserving hero, who is none other than MGR, dissolves the impeding caste, class and parental structures of power in his own inimitable fashion. The limits to desire and emotional involvement that are set by the pre-existing structures of power and hierarchy are, thus, subverted in these films. This stands out as a moment of freedom for the audience, especially for a women audience.

Second, the villains are lustful, rapacious and sadistic in these films, and often employ force as a means of making unwilling women submit. In MGR, on the other hand, one finds elements of reversal. He is represented as an exceptional man who does not indulge in sexual violence against women. An illustration of this could be *Oli Vilakku* (1968), MGR's hundredth film. The film revolves around a young widow, who gets married at the age of four, and a noble-hearted thief, who is the male protagonist of the film. The widow leaves her home to escape the ill-treatment by her wealthy in-laws, and lives with the thief. What is of importance, here, is that all through the film, the widow is presented as sexually *available*. She admires (with much satisfaction) her own image in the mirror—a universal sign of vanity. She accepts coloured sarees (as against the culturally prescribed white ones for widows) as gifts from the hero. She wears low-cut blouses and wraps herself tightly in sarees, *revealing* her physical contours. Significantly, her own brother-in-law as well as the villain of the film (the head of the criminal gang in which the hero is an unwilling member) attempts to rape her, but she

is saved by the hero. When she begins to live with the thief, the people of the neighbourhood suspect her morals and accuse her; 'You have lost your *tali*, but not your desire'. In this universe of sexual aggressors, MGR plays the role of her protector and guardian. He physically distances himself from her by sleeping in the porch of his own house. Even when inebriated, he does not attempt to exploit her sexually.[3] The grateful widow tells him: 'My brother-in-law who should have considered me like his mother treated me like his wife. But you have treated me as if I were a goddess. One should worship you.'

The pattern repeats in a number of other films as well. In *Madapura* (1962), MGR marries, by force of circumstance, a woman who is not in love with him. He consciously and scrupulously avoids physical love with his newly wedded wife, though the film eventually resolves the ambiguity by eliminating the other woman (who was really in love with the hero) through a predictable filmic death. In *Kanavan* (1968), the heroine who is a *feminist* dreams that the hero whom she marries out of sheer convenience will force her sexually. But contrarily, he walks out of the bedroom to sleep in the ever-present porch! In Tamil society where violence against women (sex being part of it) is a day-to-day reality, the hero, thus apparently represents a counterpoint.

Third, the repressed sexuality of women in Tamil society finds its inversion in MGR films. It is a cultural norm that women are to earn their reputation by controlling their desires, that is, their sexuality should ideally be passive. This social construct, which helps men to minimise their anxiety over the *threatening* sexuality of women, breaks down during brief liminal situations, that is, during situations where the rigidly imposed rules of society are relaxed for brief

periods—often as a safety valve and with social consent. For instance:

> In South Indian weddings when the nuptial night is celebrated and generally when women get together one can hear unabashed conversation on sex by several old ladies…Jokes on the sexual act, pubic hair and comments on performance are in abundance with these ladies. Watching them one would feel that the topic is an obsession with them; almost a verbal orgasm to the physical one they probably lacked. Many men have told me that South Indian women have taken sex rather casually pointing out to these open talks. On the contrary, if they took it casually it would not lead to such suppressed giggles and talks almost bordering on depravity, during certain occasions.[4]

Watching MGR films constitutes one such liminal experience for a female audience. In these films, it is the young and beautiful heroine who takes the initiative, dreams of the hero recurrently and pursues him—behaviour that would in real life be treated as brazen. The heroine has dreams that are risqué (in the form of song and dance sequences). While the dances are choreographed to resemble the act of physical love, the songs are explicitly sexual and replete with double entendre. Pulamaipitthan,[5] who wrote several songs for MGR films takes prides in himself for having given vent to sexual fantasies in those songs like none else had before. He notes that the physical description of the hero dominates the songs in MGR films. This is contrary to the usual Tamil film songs where the heroine's bodily features find a place of prominence. MGR himself wanted these sequences to be so, and the only thing that bothered him was their being passed by the Board of Censors.[6]

We have already noted that MGR expressed his defiance and selfhood through gestures that were taboo. It must be added here that not only did MGR adopt anti-deferential attitudes and gestures,

but he also displayed his fair skin to advantage. Short-sleeved shirts, bare chest, rippling muscles and tight fitting clothes—MGR on the screen revels in his physicality, and, in this context, a certain auto-eroticism communicates itself most effectively to female viewers.

Thus, the repressed sexuality of the Tamil woman finds its momentary and unreal liberation in observing these sequences. There are at least three points which are important to understand the meaning and limits of such sexual *freedom* for the female audience. First, in a society where female voyeurism is censored as culturally unacceptable, the darkened atmosphere of the cinema hall is perhaps one of the very few places where women can indulge in such voyeurism.[7] Thus, the flickering images on the screen gain an added relevance for women spectators. Second, by attributing desire to the heroine and at the same time distancing the hero from desire (that is, 'he is not under her thumb'), these films assert MGR's masculinity. This notion of the *distant* hero also proves effective in deferring female sexual gratification, and, thereby, definite patriarchal limits are set to this *free release* of female sexuality. In several of MGR films, more than one woman desires and pursues the hero, and unlike the usual Tamil films, the hero does not marry in the course of the film but only at the end, that is, once his *other* more important worldly/manly duties are performed.[8] MGR was only too aware of the meaning of such a cinematic representation. Referring to his first love, he wrote in his unfinished autobiography:

> [When I was fifteen] I was in love with a girl for the first time. Was I in love with her? Yes. This is what I told my friends. No. If I tell them I was in love with her, how would it make me proud?…I told my friends that a girl is, on her own, in love with me.[9]

Third, MGR being represented on the screen as an idealised *object* of female desire does, at another level, turn him into an ego-ideal for the male audience themselves.

The importance that is bestowed on the image of the self-effacing mother by the dutiful hero in MGR films is also another factor which endears the hero to women audience. Several of the MGR films give primacy to the role of the mother, and it is reflected in the names of films, such as *Thaikupin Tharam* [Wife After Mother (1956)], *Thai Sollai Thattathe* [Don't Go Against Mother's Words (1961)], *Thayai Kaatha Thanayan* [Son Who Saved the Mother (1962)], *Thayin Madiyil* [In the Lap of the Mother (1964)] and *Theiva Thai* [Divine Mother (1964)]. The hero, moreover, is shown to be celebrating the greatness of the mother in the course of several popular lyrics. For instance, the hero *sings* in *Neerum Neruppum* (1971):

> *My god reveals itself in my mother's person.*
> *If we supplicate at her feet,*
> *We'll prosper in our vocation.*

Such a representation on the screen plays upon the filial sentiments of the female spectators, who then literally imagine the hero to be a member of their households. Quite revealingly, an hugely successful MGR film carried the title *Yenga Veettu Pillai* (The Son of Our Home), and some of the election campaign posters of the AIADMK were signed below as *Unga Veettu Pillai—MGR* or *Son of Your Home—MGR*. Significantly, MGR, during public meetings, addressed his female audience as *Thai Kulam* or *the community of mothers*. It was also well propagated that MGR, in his real life, had shown great devotion to his mother Sathyabama. This included worshipping her picture every morning. We may remember here, '…the folklore of all

the Dravidian languages values highly the mother as the greatest goddess, whom the son should worship…'[10]

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[1] Lakshmi, C.S. (1984). *The face behind the mask: Women in Tamil literature*. New Delhi, p. 229.

[2] Blackburn, Stuart H. & A.K. Ramanujam (Eds) (1986). Introduction. In A*nother harmony: New essays on the folklore of India*. Delhi, p. 12.

[3] *Oli Vilakku* is probably the only film in which MGR is shown to be drinking, though unwillingly, and only once. A drunken MGR compares himself to an animal. Drinking and violence against women are intimately connected in Tamil Nadu, as elsewhere.

[4] Lakshmi, C.S. (1984). *The face behind the mask: Women in Tamil literature*. New Delhi, p. 6.

[5] Pulamaipitthan (1986). *Ninaivugalin oorvalam* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 118.

[6] Ibid., p. 118. See also, R.M. Veerappan's interview in *Cinema Express*, 15 November 1988.

[7] Incidentally, Tamil writer Jayakanthan's novella, *Cinimavukku Poona Cittalu*, centres around the libidinal fantasies of a woman worker who is an incorrigible MGR fan. [Jayakanthan. (1986). *Cinemavukku Poona Cittalu* (in Tamil). Madurai.] See also Kirupakaran, Che. (1987). Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation. *Tamil thiraipada illakiyam: M.G. Ramachandran naditha thiraipadangal* (in Tamil). Madras: University of Madras, p. 52.

[8] On the role of male bonding as a means to assert masculinity, see Hay, Valerie. (1986). *Patriarchy and pub culture*. London/New York.

[9] Ramachandran, M.G. (1 August 1971). 'Naan yaen piranthaen', Part 69, *Ananda Vikadan*.

[10] Vanamamalai, N. (1981). *Interpretations of Tamil folk creations*. Trivandrum, p. 85.

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The moments of *freedom* held out for women in MGR films are fragmentary and do not, in the final analysis, even lead to an open-ended critique of the all-pervasive male domination in Tamil society. Rather, the closure of films invariably *resolves* the women's question by affirming patriarchal values. This affirmation of patriarchy is normally done through two modes. First, the hero tames the non-conforming woman or the so-called shrew who is the subject of male desire, and, at the same time, male anxiety. Secondly, in these films, monogamy, chastity and all the symbols associated with these institutions of male domination are carefully elaborated and defended as foremost *womanly virtues*.

The manner in which female sexuality is socially constructed in Tamil society, as elsewhere, is that an independent woman (that is, a woman who is not under male domination) is sexually threatening and subversive. In popular Hinduism, those goddesses who are not under male control are more feared as potentially destructive than goddesses with male consorts.[1] This male anxiety over female sexuality is only heightened when the woman in question presents herself as a transgressor of socially prescribed norms, be they related to dress, space or anything else. And men are supposed to establish their honour/virility by taming such non-conforming women into docile wives.[2]

An example of how MGR, the hero, plays out this role of a virile man taming a non-conforming woman is in the film *Kanavan* (1968),

which is significant for more than one reason. Not only is the heroine, Rani, of the film explicitly portrayed as a *feminist*, but also according to the film posters, the story for the film was provided by none other than MGR himself. Also, the Tamil word *kanavan* means husband. The film revolves around the spoilt daughter of a rich man. Wearing shorts and sweat-shirts and other modern costumes, she declares, ‘My aim is to punish these headstrong men’ and ‘to live independently’. She insults and turns down those men who offer their hands to her in marriage. An ageing and worried father writes an filmy will which says that unless his rebellious daughter gets married within a month, she will fail to inherit any of his property. To get the property and, at the same time, to retain her independence from an enslaving marriage, she marries a prisoner who is condemned to die at the gallows. Of course, the prisoner is convicted on false charges. Rani waits expectantly for the day of the hero's hanging.

But the timely arrival of fresh evidence leads to the hero's unexpected acquittal. Freed from the gallows, MGR, the hero, scornfully tells the heroine, ‘How could there be someone like you in Tamil Nadu where women treat it as a boon to die when their husbands are alive?’ and declares, ‘Family is like a temple’. Without the hero's hovering protection, a web of unsavoury events overtake her life. An ambitious manager of one of her firms concocts love letters in her name and blackmails her. A dejected and harassed Rani at last realises that only her husband can protect her. She bids farewell to her feminism and modern costumes, and returns repentantly to the hero. Clad in a saree, she confesses, ‘I am fit only to be at your feet’. She touches her husband's feet every morning as a stereotypical, chaste, dedicated Tamil wife is expected to.

Similar is the representations in films, such as *Kumarikottam* (1971) and *Vivasayee* (1967). In *Vivasayee*, the landlord's urban-educated daughter calls the hero *a country brute* (in English, of course), but eventually longs for him. In several other MGR films, the process of taming does not constitute the central theme of the film, but the heroine is often marked by a little rebellion in terms of her dress. She does not present herself in sarees, but in modern costumes, such as skirts. But it all changes once she meets the hero. In *Chandrodayam* (1966), when the skirt-wearing daughter of a landlord falls in love with the hero, he reveals his chaste preferences, 'I don't like you wearing skirts: wear saree, put kumkumum on your forehead…and be a civilised girl', and gifts her a saree.

The modern dresses are used in these films to signify that women are *available*. In *Vivasayee*, the heroine's T-shirt *incites* a peasant to molest her. Pardoning the peasant, for it was not his fault but that of the woman's costume, the hero covers her already covered bosom with a towel as if it were a saree *pallu*. When she falls in love with the hero, she comes to meet him in a saree which provokes him to break into song. Predictably, the song begins with the line, '*Ipadathan Irukavendum Pompalay*' (this is how a woman should be). The hero puts down the *rebellion* encoded in women's costumes in several other films, such as *Mukarasi* (1966) and *Pallandu Vazhga* (1975).

Interestingly, the woman who is tamed by the hero is normally urban, educated and from the upper class, indulging in a bit of English. In the dichotomised social universe of MGR films, this helps the hero not only to affirm male domination, but also to play upon the rural–urban divide, and to stamp the countryside with a certain authenticity and constitute it as a repository of culture. As an

illustration, one can cite a song from *Periya Idathu Penn* (1963) in which the hero plays the familiar role of *taming the shrew*:

This is the town.
Of course, the place is big
only the [people's] minds are narrow.
Girls of the kitchen
go out for schools.
They carry piles of books
and read a lot.
But fail to understand
the world of experience.

They the Queens of the country
are only wives in the home.
Love in the town
dissolves half way.
Love in the countryside
is ever steadfast.

Most of the MGR fans are from rural and semi-urban areas, and his films always perform better in *B* and *C* centres (that is, small towns and villages) than they do in the *A* centres (that is, big urban centres).[3]

The notion of family and chastity is also especially valourised in MGR films. In his films, the heroine's sole endeavour is to get married to MGR, the hero, and she waits endlessly for him to complete *his* more important and more urgent work before he finally weds her at the end of the film. In other words, she sacrifices her selfhood, almost masochistically, to affirm the so-called superior male ends and, at once, to valourise the patriarchal family. The

obsessive commitment of the heroine to marry and raise a family acquires rather morbid forms. If she suspects that the hero is in love with someone else, she thinks of ending her life which, in other words, is a denial of her self-worth [as in *Madapura* (1962)].

MGR films ossify the received patriarchal notion that the women's place is at home whereas the men's is the the outer world. Significantly, this process of ossification is affected not through a conscious imposition of the hero's will, but through the heroine's own choice. The hero constantly reinforces the importance of marriage as the irrevocable destination for women by taking on the responsibility of *settling down* his sister in marriage. He is most often the eldest male member of a fatherless household, shouldering all the family responsibilities. In *Thanipiravi* (1966), he vows not to remove his sparse beard till he has arranged a satisfactory husband for his sister. In *Thaer Thiruvizha* (1968), he sweats it out as a rickshaw-puller to accumulate 40 sovereigns of gold, which are to be gifted as dowry at his sister's wedding. In *Ninaithathai Mudipavan* (1975), the rural hero migrates to the city and works as a bandmaster to earn money enough to get his lame sister married. All these tales have a familiar ring of reality; and the reality is, indeed, one that contains the woman within the shackles of marriage.

In MGR films, as in wider society, a woman's identity is dependent on that of her husband, however boorish he might be. And it is her marital status, as symbolised in the ever-present *tali*, which invests her with respectability and a religiously endowed auspiciousness. Its other aspect—widowhood—is dreaded and treated as inauspicious. In these films, death for the villain at the hands of the hero is averted due to the intervention of the villain's innocent wife. The hero accedes to the request of the pleading woman to save her *tali* by sparing the villain. In *Vivasayee* (1967), the generous hero spares

the life of the notorious landlord who desires the younger sister of his own wife, and in *Mahadevi* (1957) that of a rapacious minister who has attempted, persistently but unsuccessfully, to violate the modesty of the hero's resolute wife—all because of their wives' plea to save their *tali*. *Tali* is, thus, according to these films, an indispensable symbol of respectability for any woman. In *Urimai Kural* (1976), MGR rather cheerfully *sings*:

> *If you are born a woman*
> *you should bow your head to a man*
> *that he may tie the wedding*
> *knot [tali] around your neck.*

Moreover, the key tenet of the monogamous family, that is, chastity as a prescribed virtue for women comes in for celebration in MGR films. While the vile looking villains are surrounded by scantily dressed vamps, the hero is associated with women who are chaste. They do not ever think of other men. *Mahadevi* (1957), an early and successful film featuring MGR as the hero, is a rather long-winded story of a married woman's uncompromising struggle to save her chastity from the lustful villain who proclaims, 'It is either Mahadevi or the goddesses of death'. Mahadevi emerges as a normative Tamil woman with enduring inner/spiritual strength, willing even to surrender the lives of her husband and infant son to preserve her chastity. Of course, the turn of events in the film sees to it that the villain dies and at the closure of the film, a floral tribute is offered to the image of mother goddess who is, at the same time, Mahadevi herself. The presence of one or more such *Mahadevis* is mandatory in MGR films. In *Rickshawkaran* (1971), the heroine's mother advises her daughter, 'One should be a good wife or a good mother'.

In the same film, another woman character, at the moment of her death, defends the husband who has poisoned her!

The notion of chastity is ubiquitous both in Tamil culture and politics:

> From ancient times to the present, purity or chastity has been associated with sacredness or spirituality which is in turn linked with Tamil language and Tamil womanhood. Just as Tamil language must retain its purity or chastity to retain its sacredness or spirituality, Tamil women should retain the purity or chastity to retain their sacredness or spirituality.[4]

Thus, MGR films valourise a conservative element of the common sense in Tamil society.

If women, as they are constituted in MGR films, uphold chastity as the foremost womanly virtue, these films also underscore the fact that any woman who has lost her sexual innocence is unfit to be the hero's bride. Often, it is not merely for the hero, but for any man. The virgin-whore dichotomy, thus, acquires a certain centrality in these films. In *Asai Mugam* (1965), the villain of the film changes his face to resemble that of the hero's and makes successful incursions into the hero's space. This leaves the heroine confused. MGR, the hero, extracts a promise from her that she will not have sexual liaisons with anyone until after she is married. The hero's woman should not lose her sexual innocence, not even by error. The worst presentation of such idea on the screen comes from *Oli Vilakku* (1968), which is the Tamil remake of the popular Hindi film *Phool Aur Patthar* and was produced by S.S. Vasan. In the Hindi original, featuring Dharmendra and Meena Kumari, the hero marries a widow at the end. But in the Tamil version, the ending of the film was changed at the instance of MGR himself, so that the widow dies a tragic death and the hero weds an unmarried woman.[5] The widow is unfit for the hero as she has already lost her sexual innocence by the fact of her

previous marriage. If she marries again, it would mean, within the cultural codes of Tamil society, that her desire has taken precedence over her spirituality.

In short, the ubiquitous and overarching structure of patriarchy in Tamil Nadu is reaffirmed, time and again, through MGR films. The moments of *freedom* that these films offer to women spectators are necessarily contained within this structure of patriarchy.

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[1] Shulman, David (1980). *Tamil temple myths: Sacrifice and divine marriage in the South Indian saiva tradition*. Princeton, pp. 144–57.

[2] Beck's statistical breakdown of 4,000 Indian folk tales shows that women are presented in them, generally, as committing adultery and strong women as negative. [Beck, Brenda E.F. (1972). *Peasant Society in Konku*. Vancouver.] See also Blackburn, Stuart H. & A.K. Ramanujam (Eds) (1986). Introduction. In *Another harmony: New essays on the folklore of India*. Delhi, pp. 8–9.

[3] As much as urban women, urban men are also negatively represented in MGR films. In *Thaer Thiruvizha* (1968) and *Petralthan Pillaiya* (1966), urban men seduce village girls and abandon them pregnant. In *Ninaithathai Mudipavan* (1975), which MGR enacts two roles: the urban MGR is a diamond thief, while the rural one is a responsible, hardworking person.

[4] Pandian, J. (1987). *Caste, nationality and ethnicity: An interpretation of Tamil culture, history and social order*. Bombay, p. 49.

[5] Narayanan, Aranthai. (25 August 1983). Nadodi mannanin idaya kani, Part 19, *Yediroli* (in Tamil).

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Given a particular emphasis on MGR films, if women extended unprecedented support to the hero, both on the screen and in the terrain of party politics, it was mainly because of the hegemonising sweep of patriarchy in Tamil culture. From childhood socialisation within the household onwards, girls are raised to believe that the home is their confine and chastity, their virtue. While young girls partake in rituals seeking divine intervention to deliver them good husbands, married women do the same asking for long lives for their husbands. The Tamil language itself, which in its own way constitutes and at the same time reveals the sociocultural reality of Tamil society, is strongly inscribed with values of male domination. For instance, Tamil has a word for widow (*kaimpenn*), but not one for widower. While it has several words to denote women who are perceived as immoral, such as *Vaipatti*, *Koothiyal*, *Thathi*, *Kanikai* and *Parathai*, it lacks any such for her male counterpart.

It is not that patriarchy exists as a unified discourse in the common sense of the Tamil subaltern classes. As we have already seen, common sense is contradictory in as much as it contains mutually opposing categories and ideas. Several of the recent studies on folk/subaltern culture in Tamil Nadu reveal that the ensemble of subaltern common sense contains elements which, in their own ways, pose challenges to patriarchal values.

In the mourning songs of lower caste Parayars, which at times subvert the upper caste notions of auspiciousness (*mankalam*),

karma (*vinai*) and wrong (*pavam*), a married woman could describe herself as a widow and call her husband a criminal. Its implications are evident.

> For a married woman to call her husband a criminal and herself a widow, for her to give open expression to her sense of her own value independent of and in opposition to the acts and opinions of others is to deny or neglect her [socially prescribed] duty as guardian of auspiciousness.[1]

There are also Tamil folk songs sung by married women in celebration of their lovers and folk epics, such as *Alli Arasani Malai*, *Pavalakodi* and *Yeniyettram*, which allow for women's authority, independent of men, which is almost as a rule denied to them in real life.[2]

Even the Tamil folk representations of the archetypal Sita, who is viewed as the symbol of passive Indian womanhood, differ substantially from the classical portrayal given in Valmiki's Ramayana. In the folk version, it was Sita, and not Rama, who fought and killed the hundred-headed Ravana. In other words, '… Valmiki's Sita carefully checks and veils her violent potential…while the "folk" Sita unleashes her aggressive and destructive instincts…'[3]

One can read definite elements of a counter-patriarchal discourse in all these folk forms. However, one should not exaggerate them, for they are also interpenetrated at different levels with patriarchal values. For instance, referring to the folk Ramayana, Shulman notes:

> Although Rama remains remote, passive, capable of fear and dejection, he is still the ultimately powerful validating agency; he sees the outcome of the battle with his eye of wisdom…Sita conquers with *his* weapons and with his mantras, and in the name of his kingship. His presence is clearly necessary, even if others must do his fighting for him.[4]

As much as the folk literary traditions, certain cultural practices such as spirit possession, which are widespread in rural Tamil Nadu, are also inscribed with a consciousness that is anti-patriarchal. It is noteworthy that spirit possession is an exclusively female cultural practice and those who are possessed are neither too young nor too old, but are either girls who have attained puberty or young wives. Under possession of spirits, wives express their hatred for their husbands; and unmarried girls, their love for specific men. The victims of spirit possession normally claim that they are possessed by male spirits, and they use this claim to transgress the restrictions imposed on their everyday lives as women. They, under the influence of the spirit, perform male rural sports, such as *silampam*, ask for and use normally prohibited items of male consumption like snuff, arrack and cheroot, draw on their faces moustaches and imitate men by whistling and laughing boisterously and address men in disrespectful terms.[5]

We need to compare here these counter-patriarchal elements of Tamil folk forms with the moments of *freedom* offered for women in MGR films. First, the folk forms challenge, in their own way, the most important tenet of patriarchy, that is, the monogamous family. Married women singing in praise of their male lovers and treating disrespectfully their *tali* by presenting themselves as widows, while indeed possible in folk forms, is completely unimaginable in the films of MGR. Second, in folk forms women emerge as *subjects* articulating their own viewpoint, which is counter-patriarchal. On the contrary, in MGR films, the moments of *freedom*—lack of male sexual violence and a marriage free from the pre-existing caste/class-mediated structures of power—are a by-product of the hero affirming his selfhood; women are merely passive recipients of these moments of *freedom*, and are not products of their role as

subjects. We may also note here that those sequences, where women take the initiative in terms of sexuality, are dream sequences within the film narrative and not part of the *real* in the narrative. This, too, is a strategy to deny them their role as subjects giving free vent to their desires. Thus, the counter-patriarchal elements of the folk forms are rather progressive, compared with the moments of *freedom* for women in the MGR films.

Such counter-hegemonic elements, however minimal and fragmented they may be, are a part of the mosaic of subaltern common sense, and did not find their delineation in the MGR films. Instead, it was patriarchy that emerged as a natural order within these films. Thus, as was the manner in which MGR films appropriated heroic ballads, the *women's question* was also *resolved* to reaffirm the existing order of male domination rather than to transcend it. The veneer of dissent is, however, retained all through.

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[1] Egnor, Margaret T. (1986). Internal iconity in parayar “crying songs”. In Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujam (Eds), *Another harmony: New essays on the folklore of India*. Delhi, p. 334.

[2] Kesavan, G. (1987). *Nattupuraviyal katturaigal* (in Tamil). Tiruchi, pp. 27, 88–113.

[3] Shulman, David (1980). *Tamil temple Myths: Sacrifice and divine marriage in the South Indian saiva tradition*. Princeton, p. 126.

[4] Ibid., p. 120.

[5] Spirit possession represents only a short-lived liminal experience for women, and it does not subvert the patriarchal system in any substantial way. Their non-normative behaviour under spirit possession is treated as the influence of a foreign agent, namely, the intrusive spirit, and they are reintegrated into the structure after exorcism rites. If they refuse to be exorcised for long, they run the danger of being treated as insane by the local community. See Gunasekharan, K.A. (1988). *Nattupura mannum makkalum* (in Tamil), Madras, pp. 127–30.

21

So far, we have seen how a specific image of MGR, the hero, was constituted on the screen, and where and how this image was embedded in the common sense of the subaltern classes. MGR was well aware of the need to have a coherently presented image, and he, in fact, took care to build such an image for himself. In his words:

> …it is not enough if you are a good man, you must create an image that you are a good man. Every man must have an image. Take Nagi Reddy or S.S. Vasan or myself. Each of us has a distinct image. The image is what immediately strikes you when you see a person or hear his name. You put forward an image of yourself if you want to get anywhere.[1]

It was not only that MGR was aware of the need to have an image, but he was also acutely aware that it should appeal to the oppressed and the defeated. MGR noted in his autobiography that an artiste craves accolades after hard work from those who live in poverty and find their dreams turning out empty and unreal, and those numerous young men and women who have had to endure disappointment on account of unrequited love as well as those young people who got successfully married often breaking almost impossible barriers of caste and religion to do so.[2]

We have already seen that MGR changed the storyline of *Pallandu Vazhgha* (1975) and *Oli Vilakku* (1968)—two Tamil remakes of Hindi films—to cohere with his meticulously constructed image. In the same way, he read and reread film dialogues during the making of every one of his later films, and carefully altered

them;[3] film lyrics were to be approved by him before being recorded, and he asked lyric writers to introduce changes in them to suit his image.[4] Even a veteran film song writer, such as Marudakasi, was to rewrite a song for *Ninaithathai Mudipavan* (1975) at MGR's intervention.[5] Moreover, MGR was well versed in every aspect of film making—make-up, direction, camera, music, editing, etc., and he utilised all these skills in constructing an image for himself. He decided the camera angle for fight sequences, made changes in costumes, chose the music for songs and re-choreographed dance sequences.[6] According to Cho, a co-actor of MGR in a number of films, 'All the fights in his [MGR's] films were personally shot and edited by him.'[7]

MGR could obviously do all these because of his star status and because of the enormous control he exercised over the Madras film industry as such.

> With the emergence of the star-cult, the two leading stars [of the Tamil film world] Sivaji Ganesan and MGR started a system of financial control of the industry. It is said that whenever they signed a contract for acting, it included the distribution rights of the film for the city of Madras. Sivaji Ganesan has his own cinema hall and MGR his own studio. With a whip hand over the entire industry they could make or mar a producer by giving or postponing to give call sheet dates. With the power they had, the entire Tamil film industry was at their mercy. In such a situation where they could easily decide the financial fate of so many producers, it was possible for them to carefully nurse their political image or decide the pattern of the political message they wanted to get across.[8]

MGR perceived that projecting an image was more important than demonstrating his histrionic talent on the screen. The reverse was true for Sivaji Ganesan. While MGR was as successful in politics as

in films, Sivaji failed as a politician despite his political ambitions and indisputable star status.

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[1] Krishnaswamy, N.S. (9 January 1988). From Hero to Messiah…Step by Step. *Indian Express*.

[2] Ramachandran, M.G. (24 May 1970). Naan yaen piranthaen, *Ananda Vikatan* (7).

[3] Still photographer R.N. Nagaraja Rao, a life-long associate of MGR, in Vijayan, S. (1989). *MGR Kathai* (in Tamil). Madras.

[4] Pulamaipithan. (1986). *Ninaivugalin oorvalam* (in Tamil). Madras, pp. 115–17.

[5] *Bommai*, February 1989.

[6] Vijayan, S. (1989). *MGR kathai* (in Tamil). Madras; *Cinema Express*, 15 May 1982 and *Cinema Express*, 1 April 1984.

[7] Cho, Ramaswamy. (26 December 1987). 'MGR: triumph of will'. *Indian Express*.

[8] Sivathamby, Karthigesu. (1981). *The Tamil film as a medium of political communication*. Madras, pp. 51–52.

22

The question is why the subaltern classes failed to differentiate between the screen image of MGR and MGR in real life. We have already seen how MGR's image and the actual MGR were at odds. He was a do-gooder on the screen (though only within the moral economy of an essentially iniquitous system), but his actual politics did not merit support from the subaltern classes. The most significant reason as to why his followers did not see much of a difference between the filmic and the real MGR was the large-scale circulation of a certain type of constructed biography of MGR, which projected his real life as consistent with his life on the screen. Political platforms, newspapers, pamphlets, films, calendars and party posters were used with extraordinary skill in constructing this biography. Let me now turn to how this biography helped transform MGR, the film hero, into *the real MGR*.

23

First, let me take up the question of how these biographical representations handle MGR's subalternity and his role as a renouncer in real life.

MGR's early life was, no doubt, one of extreme deprivation. He was born at Kandy in Ceylon (the present-day Sri Lanka), the fifth and last child of his parents. When he was just two and a half years old, he lost his father and the family migrated to the temple town of Kumbakonam in Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu. Due to acute poverty, two of his sisters and a brother died in quick succession, and he had to forego his schooling and join a drama troupe as a child actor when he was merely seven years old. It took him many years of hardship as a low paid stage artiste, doing bit roles in itinerant drama troupes, before he could gain a foothold in the highly competitive Madras film industry. His modest beginnings and the poverty of his early days were well propagated through public speeches, pamphlets, party newspapers and other mediums of political communication. MGR, himself, often publicly referred to his days of sweat and tears.[1] For instance, in the course of an All India Radio talk, delivered on 30 June 1982, on the free noon-meal scheme meant for the school-going children in Tamil Nadu, he said:

> This scheme is an outcome of my experience of extreme starvation at an age when I knew only to cry when I was hungry. But for the munificence of a woman next door who extended a bowl of rice gruel to us and saved us from the cruel hands of death, we would have departed from this world long ago. Such merciful womenfolk, having great faith in me, elected me as

> Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. To wipe the tears of these women I have taken up this project…To picture lakhs and lakhs of poor children who gather to partake of nutritious meals in the thousands of hamlets and villages all over Tamil Nadu, and blessing us in their childish prattle, will be a glorious event.[2]

Similarly, the main thrust of his speeches delivered immediately after he was suspended from the DMK, led by M. Karunanidhi in 1972, was to invoke this commonality between himself and the common people. He used to repeat in meetings:

> I am standing with the people and looking at bungalow(s). But the leadership of the DMK today is sitting in bungalows and looking at the people. Because of this, the DMK has lost the support of the people, students, peasants and workers, and stands isolated.[3]

The inexpensive biographies of MGR, which are sold in village fairs and urban pavements and bought by the literate poor, relentlessly harp on MGR's early years of poverty. I shall refer to such books as *popular biographies* in the rest of the essay. These biographies, written in simple Tamil with grammatical errors, are authored by ordinary people. Thus, apart from influencing the reader's perceptions about MGR, they also reflect the views of the subaltern authors. Reflecting on the noon-meal scheme, one of these popular biographies wrote, ‘During his early days, MGR bore [a lot of] suffering. For a single meal, he struggled endlessly. Knowing that the poor would be undergoing similar suffering, he took up this project [noon-meal scheme]. Isn't he godly?’[4] Another one recorded, ‘Do you know what was his wage when this great provider first joined a drama troupe? Four annas! That four annas was not his daily wage, but his monthly wage.[5] Yet another anonymous popular biography of MGR indulgently uses flowery metaphors to highlight

MGR's early poverty-stricken life: ‘Only in mud the red lotus flowers; only in the intestines of [lowly] oyster pearls twinkle; only in poverty, unique personalities [like MGR] emerge.’[6]

MGR always played up this emotional oneness between himself and the common people through mannerisms, physical gestures and language. Every public meeting addressed by MGR had certain fixed ingredients. On reaching the site of the meeting, he hugged old women, christened children of the poor and kissed them with explicit fondness. He threw back at the cheering crowd garlands given to him. He always lifted his left hand, holding out his two fingers (representing the AIADMK party symbol, the two leaves) and waved at the crowd—evoking the crowd to wave back in turn. A deep sense of camaraderie pervaded the atmosphere of these meetings. And MGR addressed his followers as *Rathatin Rathammana Udanpirapugale* (my blood brothers and sisters). This reference to blood was because of the liberal blood donation by his devout fans when he was hospitalised after being shot at the throat by M.R. Radha. Also, party posters effectively represented MGR as one among the common people. A telling AIADMK election poster released during the 1980 election carried a photograph of MGR hugging an old emaciated woman with a wrinkled face. The message in the poster read:

> I am not a scholar who has mastered Economics. But I have suffered hunger and poverty in my life. I have climbed thousands of steps and sought employment and was tired of the statement ‘no job.’ I know the suffering of my mother who could not give us a handful of rice when we returned from school. Till my last breath, I will work [for the people] that no mother in Tamil Nadu suffer the way my mother did.
>
> MGR—Born poor—Brought up by the poor—Lives for the poor—The child of our home.

Not merely MGR, but the AIADMK, the party founded by MGR, was likewise presented as a party of the poor. It is part of the AIADMK folklore that the party's name was suggested to MGR by an ordinary handloom weaver, Anankaputur Ramalingam.[7]

Thus, it is so constructed that MGR is not a person belonging to the elite who tells tales of other people's oppression on the screen, but is himself a victim of oppression telling his own tales, and those of men and women similarly placed.

In the same way, if MGR is a renouncer of wealth in films, he is, as this constructed biography would have it, a renouncer of wealth in real life as well. Even before MGR became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, his image as a (real life) renouncer of wealth for the cause of the poor was well entrenched in the popular mind. As Hardgrave Jr. puts it:

> MGR is a symbol of hope for the poor in South India. Without children, he has adopted the poor as his wards. He is always the first to give for disaster relief; he supports orphanages and schools…MGR's generosity is well-advertised, for it is the grist of his fame. When fires have destroyed some Madras hutments, he gave a lakh of rupees for relief and announced that the hundredth day of a film then running would not be celebrated because of the slum-dwellers' sufferings. As one fan puts it, 'He is always there when the huts are burnt.'[8]

For our purpose, what is important is not so much whether MGR was really generous with his wealth (which he often was not), but how he was *projected* as a provider in the popular mind.

First of all, till 1972 the party organisation of the DMK and of the AIADMK subsequently, constantly presented MGR as a selfless provider. Almost every occasion in which MGR donated money for the benefit of the poor was turned into a political event and addressed by the front ranking leaders of the DMK. Several of these

occasions, as when MGR donated raincoats to rickshaw-pullers in Madras, 1962, and when MGR's portrait was unveiled at Thyagaraja College in Madras, 1958, for collecting ₹50,000 for the college fund, were addressed by C.N. Annadurai himself. During these well-attended functions, Annadurai would employ his powerful, alliterative Tamil to celebrate MGR's munificence. To cite one such evocative speech by Annadurai:

> Wherever there is devastation by heavy rains or storms, one can see the helping hand of MGR. Giver is one who wipes the tears of those who come to him…But MGR is different. He searches out for those suffering people and wipes their tears. He is a giver even for other givers.[9]

Apart from such speeches, Annadurai also wrote about MGR's generosity in the DMK party papers.[10] The DMK newspapers, such as *Dravida Nadu* and *Murasoli*, and magazines, such as *Mutharam*, once too often carried deliberately exaggerated reports and commentaries on MGR's donations. For instance, the 1 July 1968 issue of *Mutharam* carried, on its front cover, a photograph of MGR with the caption ‘Comrade of the Poor’. The story in the magazine read, ‘Recently MGR donated Rs. 10,000 for the people who were affected by fire…It would please the hearts of the poor that he has promised to give rupees one lakh every year to construct permanent houses for the poor.’[11] It is, however, another matter that the promised one lakh rupees a year never came from him. Interestingly, a DMK propaganda song used during the 1962 general elections ran as follows:

> *The palm of Bharata Karnan*
> *Became pink because of*
> *His munificence.*
> *But the whole body of Dravida Karnan,*

Became pink because of
His munificence everyday.[12]

The Dravida Karnan of the DMK mythology who had outdone the Karnan of Mahabharata in munificence is MGR himself.

The same style of propaganda was adopted by the ADMK/AIADMK after 1972. During the Periyakulam by-election in 1982, the AIADMK election posters declared, '*koduthu koduthu sivantha karam, kumpittu ketkirathu*' (The palm that has turned pink by providing, supplicates [for your vote]). Again when MGR was ailing in 1984, the party newspapers from time to time put forward the argument that MGR would survive as a result of his earlier munificence.[13]

After coming to power in 1977, MGR consolidated this image of a renouncer by tactfully using government welfare schemes to his advantage. The most substantive example of this is the chief minister's Nutritious Meal Programme which, as we have seen earlier, was introduced in 1982. What was significant about this scheme, which covered one-sixth of the entire population of Tamil Nadu and employed two lakhs people (mostly women) for its implementation, was that it had been projected as an extension of MGR's personal charity. MGR spoke of this scheme as a result of the hunger he had to face during his early days. The AIADMK government allotted ₹8 lakhs for procuring and displaying framed pictures of MGR eating with poor children *in every one* of the noon-meal centres.[14] The propaganda material on the scheme prepared by the State Publicity Department carried a photograph of MGR holding a child. The caption printed beneath the picture read: *Undi koduthor, Uyir koduthor*, that is, 'one who gives food is the one who gives life.'

Given MGR's received image as a real-life provider, this far-reaching populist scheme funded by the government became quite easily identified as MGR's own. Small time Tamil writers and poets have written essays and poems celebrating the scheme as MGR's greatest gift to the poor in Tamil Nadu.[15] It is also important that whosoever went to MGR's home—especially party workers and his film fans—was invariably fed with a meal from a kitchen which worked almost round the clock. They carried the message of MGR's generosity wherever they went.

In addition to the DMK and the AIADMK press, the popular press in Tamil Nadu also contributed towards the making of this myth. Earlier, it was film magazines, such as *Cinema Kadir* and *Gundoosi* which periodically publicised MGR's donations.[16] Later on, especially after MGR came to power, the magazines and newspapers belonging to the *Thinathanthi* group, which are widely read by the common people and are treated as low-brow, constantly projected MGR's gifts to the poor. A single episode narrated in a serialised biography of MGR published in *Varanthira Rani*, a weekly with a print-order of more than 3 lakhs, will give us the propagandist flavour of what the popular Tamil press did to promote MGR as a renouncer of wealth. The episode in question relates to one Shanmugham *alias* Gorky, a school teacher-turned-hack writer, who was bedridden due to constant and excessive drinking. MGR met all his medical expenses; and a grateful Gorky got one of his forearms tattooed with a picture of MGR (a practice promoted by MGR among his followers soon after he founded the ADMK in 1972) and the other with the following words: '*Intha oyir MGR koduthathu*' (This life is a gift of MGR). *Varanthira Rani* not only narrated the story in all its details, but also published photographs of both the tattooed forearms of Gorky.[17]

One of the events in MGR's life which was carefully singled out for repeated mention in these biographies was MGR's auctioning off of a sword made of 110 sovereigns of gold to raise war funds during the 1962 Indo-China war.[18] Often, it is rhetorically posed, 'Who will have the large heart to donate 110 sovereigns of gold?' People in Tamil Nadu, as elsewhere, do have an obsessive attachment to gold and such narration poses MGR as a renouncer effectively.[19] Also, according to these biographies, if MGR gave up his career of film acting once he became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, it is because he was a renouncer:

> …If he produces four or five films, he can earn crores of rupees. He knows this very well. Then why is he not acting in films? If he decides to act in films, no law can prevent him…Do you know what is the reason for his giving up acting? He wants to serve the people of Tamil Nadu. He wants to wipe out their problems.[20]

MGR himself often advanced similar line of argument from public platforms that his entering politics is neither for power nor for money, but to serve the suffering Tamil people.[21]

Perhaps, in concluding this section, it is worthwhile quoting *in extenso* a letter by an MGR fan, published in a popular film magazine in 1967:

> I am one of the several lakh fans of the best Tamil actor MGR. I respect him because of his good character and generous heart.
>
> There is nothing wrong in the people liking a selfless leader leading an honest life, while living in the dazzling world of arts…I have recently read a news about him which increases my respect for him. Recently when he went to a hospital, a leper prostrated before him. MGR touched him by hand, hugged him and planted a kiss on his forehead. What a exceptional act! Everyone fears and avoids lepers. But MGR with a *handsome face* did not think twice, but touched, hugged and kissed him…[22] (emphasis added)

It is not merely wealth that MGR gave away with both hands, it was even his status when it came to the suffering people—like this loathed leper. That was how the *real life MGR* was projected and believed to be.[23] There was, thus, hardly any difference between the cinematic and the real life MGR in the popular mind.

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[1] Thandavan, R. (1983). Unpublished PhD thesis. *All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam: A study*. Madras: University of Madras, p. 159.

[2] Harriss, Barbara. (1984). *Meals and noon meals in South India: Food and nutrition policy in the rural food economy of Tamil Nadu state*, Occasional Paper 31, East Anglia: School of Development Studies, p. 16.

[3] *Dinamani*, 9 October 1972.

[4] Ponmudi, Jeya. (1988). *Sathya mainthan sadanai* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 6 and see also Velan, Kalaipadam. (n.d.). *Naan yean piranthean? Puratchi thalaivar MGR* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 26.

[5] Ponmudi, Jeya. (1988). *Sathya mainthan sadanai* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 28.

[6] Anonymous. (n.d.). *Vetri selvar MGR veera varalaru*, Madras (in Tamil), p. 5.

[7] Rangarao, Madurai R. (1986). *Anaithinthia anna ti mu ka varalaru* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 4.

[8] Hardgrave Jr, Robert L. (1979). When stars displace the Gods: The folk culture of cinema in Tamil Nadu. In *Essays in the political sociology of South India*. New Delhi, p. 102.

[9] The book contains several such public speeches delivered by C.N. Annadurai. See Srinivasamurthy, R. (Ed.) (1984). *MGR yen idayakani: Anna* (in Tamil). Madras.

[10] For instance, see *Dravida Nadu*, 18 December 1955 and *Dravida Nadu*, 13 April 1958.

[11] *Mutharam*, 1 July 1968.

[12] *Malai Murasu*, 6 July 1987.

[13] See, for example, Kalimuthu (1987), which is a collection of articles published in the daily run by the MGR's Fans Association, *Mantra Murasu.*

[14] *Mana Osai*, July 1986.

[15] Vasanthakumar, A. (1985). *Doctor MGR: Oru porulathara vallunar*. Madras, pp. 60–64.

[16] For example, see: *Gundoosi*, December 1955; *Cinema Kadir*, December 1960; *Cinema Kadir*, February 1961; *Cinema Kadir*, January 1965 and *Cinema Kadir*, October 1965.

[17] See M. Navasivayam, 'MGR kathai', parts 21 and 22 and *Varanthira Rani*, 1 and 8 January 1984.

[18] The sword was auctioned away by C.N. Annadurai at the LIAA grounds in Madras, and it fetched ₹13,000 (*Bommai*, March 1989: 55).

[19] For example, see *Vetri selvar veera varalaru*. (n.d.), p. 35 and Kalaipadam Velan. (n.d.), p. 48.

[20] Kalaipadam Velan. (n.d.), p. 63. Compare the above quotation with the following one given in the DMK's official history, 'Because of the movement's principles, [MGR] refused to act in Hindi films. This led to a loss of income worth several lakhs' [Parthasarathy, T.M. (1973). *Ti. Mu. Ka. Varalaru*. Madras (in Tamil), p. 420].

[21] See, MGR's pre-election Television talk on the eve of 1980 election given in *Thai*, 16 December 1984.

[22] *Cinema Kadir*, August 1967.

[23] For an example of how this category of renouncer was employed by the Indian National Congress during the independence struggle to mobilise the people, see Hardiman, David. (1987). *The coming of devi: Adivasi assertion in Western India*. Delhi, pp. 167–70 and also Sarkar, Sumit. (1984). The conditions and nature of subaltern militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to non-cooperation, c. 1905–22. In Ranajit Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian history and society* (Vol. III). Delhi, p. 315.

24

Let me now turn to how MGR's valour and invincibility on the screen were constituted as an element of his life in this constructed biography. First and foremost, the popular biographies of MGR isolate and place excessive emphasis on two alleged events in MGR's life in order to highlight his valour. These events were: MGR's decision to stay in the city of Madras during World War II when people moved out fearing aerial bombing, and his admiration for Netaji Subash Chandra Bose who planned to win India's freedom from the British through armed struggle. One of these popular biographies, for instance, claimed:

> At that time, World War II was [being fought] vigorously. The Japanese made advances and captured Burma and Singapore. There was the fear that Madras could be bombarded at any moment.
>
> The elder brother [of MGR], Chakrapani, was rattled. Keeping in mind the dangers of the war, he sent away his mother Sathyabama, MGR's wife Thangamani and others of the family to their native village. But MGR stayed on in Madras without any fear of death.[1]

The same booklet, referring to MGR's early association with the Congress politics, provided the readers with a large dose of MGR's admiration for Netaji:

> As an eighteen year old youth, he [MGR] exhibited great commitment to the Congress. He liked Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent methods and satyagraha.
>
> That time…

> Netaji Subash Chandra Bose hated the British rule which enslaved the people of India. He declared bravely that bargaining with the British for freedom would not do; freedom is what one gains by fighting with guns.
>
> He organised an army and fought the British. Through such a struggle, he conducted non-cooperation.
>
> This armed revolution was acceptable for our valiant son [MGR]. As a Congress man, he supported Subash Chandra Bose and raised the slogan, 'Long Live the Revolution'. As a stage artiste, MGR supported him. Through his acting, he reflected that feeling of courage.
>
> …being unhappy about the Congress policy, Subash Chandra Bose quit the Congress. That was not all. He went to Singapore and organised an army against the British.
>
> MGR [likewise] did not like the Congress policy and quit the movement.[2]

Fearlessness, virility and youthfulness are all overlapping categories in Tamil culture. MGR always took care, during his public appearances, to project an image of eternal youth. His ever present wig and fur cap concealed his balding pate, a traditional index of aging and lack of virility. His dark glasses made the wrinkles around his eyes invisible, and he always presented himself before the public heavily made-up.

One can cite several instances to highlight how MGR was obsessively concerned about the need to have a youthful look. During a public meeting in Coimbatore, in 1981, a student leader garlanded him which tilted his fur cap a bit. MGR, unable to contain his fury, slapped him repeatedly before the public.[3] Another revealing instance was when a photographer had recorded a picture of MGR, bare to the waist without his fur cap and glasses, coming out of the Kollur Mugambikai temple located in Karnataka. MGR's guards hauled up the photographer and exposed the negative.[4] According to Sridhar, a veteran film maker, the stunt sequences for MGR films in which dupe actors performed MGR's roles, were shot in secluded places away from the public gaze so that MGR's machismo was not

affected in the public eye.[5] All throughout his life, MGR took special care to preserve his well built physique. Following MGR's death, Kamal Hassan, another actor obsessed with his body, reminisced: 'MGR was always a superb physical specimen and quite often he would pass on tips to me, coaching me on different techniques of body building.'[6]

MGR's youthful image was on and off threatened by the popular press. In 1956, *Dinathanti* opened a film column named *Cinema Kural* (Voice of Cinema) mainly to portray MGR as an aged actor. MGR hit back by acting in a film, *Chandrodayam* (1966) which parodied *Dinathanti* (Daily Telegraph) as *Dina Kavarchi* (Daily Glamour) and presented its proprietor as an obsessive womaniser.[7] MGR's anxiety over his age comes out explicitly when he wrote in his biography:

> A well-known newspaper, reviewing my film *Sabash Mapillai*, wrote that my 'bald head' could be seen [in the film]. Let them write that my acting is not good; or my delivery of dialogues or facial expression is not good. I have used wigs, like the rest of the actors, depending on the roles I play. If they have written such things, it is only with the intention to create a public dislike towards me…
>
> During the funeral procession of Anna [durai], I walked all along without my cap.[8]

Again, to compensate for this lack, MGR appeared in his later films with incredibly young heroines, such as Jayalalitha, Latha and Manjula, and in a number of them, he acted with more than one heroine. This was an attempt to affirm his youthfulness and virility on the screen.

MGR's supposed real-life invincibility and eternal youth were, time and again, constructed by various kinds of media; so much so that a degree of immortality was conferred on him in real life as well as the

screen. He was presented as one who was born thrice: The first time was when he was actually born like the rest of us. The allusion to his second birth was when he survived an attempt made on his life by M.R. Radha in 1967. His third birth was when he recovered beyond expectation from his debilitating illness in 1984. There are a number of MGR fans associations in different parts of Tamil Nadu, named as *Muppiravi MGR Rasigar Mantram* (Thrice Born MGR Fans' Association).

Unlike the other leaders of the Dravidan Movement whose birthdays are always celebrated as public events with much gusto, MGR's birthday was never an occasion for celebration even when he was in power, and his age was a closely guarded secret. Instead, his followers were encouraged to celebrate the day on which he revived from bullet injuries (13 January 1967), as his (re)birth day. In his autobiography, MGR wrote, 'As you all know, I was shot at on 12 January 1967. People think that I died on that day and I was reborn on the next day. That is why they greet me on that day [13 January].'[9] After his illness on 17 January 1984, which was in any case his actual birthday also, became his (re)birth day: 'The AIADMK was full of enthusiasm, and described the day as 'a rebirth day'—MGR, on 17 January, completed 25 months with a transplanted kidney.'[10]

Political platforms and vernacular newspapers did circulate and strengthen this notion of MGR's immortality. Writing in the official organ of the All World MGR Fans' Association, *Mantra Murasu*, a cabinet colleague of MGR, K. Kalimuthu, posed rather emotionally:

> You [MGR], have rescued justice. Won't justice rescue you…you are a child of truth. Won't every mother protect her child? You have defeated time. You have also won *Yama* [the God of death] once…Win once again and make our hearts cool.[11]

This was written in 1984 when MGR was ailing in a distant US hospital.

Non-party newspapers, such as *Dinamani* (the Tamil version of the *Indian Express*), which enjoys certain respectability among the middle classes, also succumbed to such writing. An obituary of MGR published by *Dinamani* in 1987 noted:

> As shown in a film song sequence, he [MGR] resurrected in life; he laughed at *Yama*. In 1967, a few months before the general election, he was shot at by M.R. Radha. Doctors had given up his case. He [however] revived…and took a reincarnation.[12]

When he died, one of the *popular biographies* exclaimed, 'There was no trace of tiredness on MGR's body. One fails to understand how life had departed from that body…'[13] Thus, MGR's death was a subject of wonder—for he was no mere mortal.

In discussing MGR's believed real-life immortality, it may be of interest to mention that several of his films released after the shooting incident of 1967, referred to the event, subtly and not so subtly, and attested his alleged real-life invincibility. In *Yengal Thangam* (1970), MGR leaps out of a coffin to sing, 'I died—and came back alive…I laughed at *Yama*'. In *Vivasayee* (1967), when the heroine threatens the hero that she will shoot him, a friend of the hero intervenes to tell, 'Bullets would come out of him and he will survive'. MGR's immortality was emphasised in other post-1967 films as well.

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[1] Ponmudi, Jeya. (1988). *Doctor MGR veera kaviyam* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 9.

[2] Ibid., pp. 7–8.

[3] *Kedayam*, 16 July 1986.

[4] Vijayan, S. (1989), *MGR kathai* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 138.

[5] *Devi*, 15 October 1988.

[6] *Filmfare*, 1–15 February 1988.

[7] Narayanan, Aranthai. (25 August 1983). Nadodi mannanin idaya kani, Part 19, *Yediroli* (in Tamil).

[8] Ramachandran, M.G. (15 October 1972). Naan yaen piranthaen. *Ananda Vikadan* (Part 132).

[9] Ramachandran, M.G. (14 February 1971). Naan yaen piranthaen. *Ananda Vikadan* (Part 45).

[10] *Aside*, 1 February 1987.

[11] *Mantra Murasu*, 17 October 1984 in Kalimuthu, K. (1987). *Puratchi pookal* (in Tamil). Madras.

[12] *Dinamani*, 25 December 1987.

[13] Velan, Kalaipadam. (n.d.). *Naan yean piranthean? Puratchi thalaivar MGR* (in Tamil). Madras, pp. 29–30.

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To attribute the status of renouncer and immortality to MGR is to invest him with an aura of distinction that would differentiate him from his lesser followers. This aura was engineered and reinforced during virtually every one of MGR's public appearances through what one may call *rituals of consecration*. The *rituals of consecration* are part of the process of reinforcing and authenticating in real life his aura on the screen.

Turning to these rituals, one should begin with processions. The DMK and the AIADMK party processions have been, to say the least, carnivalesque; and in them, MGR was taken out from time to time as if he was a crowned king. A description of one such procession organised by the DMK in 1959 to mark the 100 day run of an MGR film, *Nadodi Mannan*, runs as follows:

> That day, a huge procession began from Madurai railway station. MGR sat on a chariot drawn by four horses [and was] thronged by the people. The chariot had a backdrop of a rising sun on a lotus.
>
> At the beginning of the procession, there were party volunteers carrying festoons. There were also artistes playing *silambam*. Elephants garlanded MGR twice [during the procession].[1]

A popular biography of MGR described this spectacular event thus: ‘When the revolutionary leader [MGR] was brought in the procession, it looked as if he was standing on a mountain of flowers.’[2] Processions of similar type continued all through MGR's political career. Such processions were and still are part of the

political tradition of the Dravidian parties in Tami Nadu. Describing a DMK procession organised in December 1966, Ryerson[3] writes:

> …bicycle brigades draped in red and black partyflags, home-made floats depicting the rising sun…or flaming martyrs for Tamil and six hundred buses all over the state filled with party stalwarts. At the rear end of the procession, high above a sea of admirers, was Annadurai. He looked like a pudgy Hindu god on a palanquin.[4]

At the end of these processions, MGR was invariably garlanded with unimaginably huge garlands, locally known as *dindu malai* which had, of late, acquired a new name—*MGR malai*.

> Made of at least 10,000 roses, the *MGR malai* costs anything from Rs. 1,500 to 2,000, and requires ten people working eight hours at a stretch to make it. It also usually requires two strong men to support it on either side of the recipient who would otherwise collapse under its weight.[5]

Also, the venues of the public meetings were decorated with imposing 30–60 feet tall, illuminated cut-outs of MGR that dwarfed the audience and enhanced MGR's overpowering presence. Party MLAs and ministers—occasionally even civil servants—quite obediently filed past their leader on the dais and ritually fell at his feet in front of thousands people watching.

These rituals of consecration were distinctly marked out by rituals of desecration performed by MGR's followers for the political opponents of MGR. The AIADMK processions which were taken out through Madras city's most important thoroughfare, Anna Salai (erstwhile Mount Road), targeted more often than not the statue of M. Karunanidhi for such ritualistic desecration. The AIADMK cadres usually flung garlands made of worn out sandals at the statue and danced around it, grief-wailing, beating their breasts and, thus, symbolically enacting his death. The day MGR died, the AIADMK

men, in an act of anger and helplessness, smashed the statue to smithereens.

Moreover, MGR carried several honorific titles by which he was referred to in public meetings, party newspapers and election posters. Some of these colourful and often inappropriate titles were *Puratchi Nadigar* (revolutionary actor), *Puratchi Thalaivar* (revolutionary leader), *Kalai Venthan* (monarch of the arts) and *Ponmana Chemmal* (golden-hearted one). Referring to leaders by honorific titles is again a well-established political practice of the DMK from the days of its very inception. Its leaders have been known by titles, such as *Arignar* (thinker), *Navalar* (silver-tongued), *Pavalar* (poet) and *Kalaignar* (artiste). Most often, MGR was addressed by these honorific titles without his name ever being mentioned. When he managed to get an honorary doctorate from the University of Madras in 1983, the AIADMK turned it into an event for much celebration throughout Tamil Nadu.[6]

Henceforth, he was always known as *Dr Puratchi Thalaivar MGR*. This, too, added to the aura, surrounding MGR's real-life image.[7]

The popular biographies have also contributed towards creating this aura around MGR. Towards this end, they invoke the past glories of MGR's family, and even the star under which he was supposed to have been born. One such biography claimed that a street in Sri Lanka had been named after MGR's father because of his honesty as a judge,[8] while another claimed that he resigned his job in Kerala instead of delivering an unjust judgement.[9] Another one, referring to MGR's birth, gave a biblical ring to the MGR story. It exclaimed:

> *MGR was born on 17 January 1917*
> *under Swathi Star.*

Swathi star appeared [in the sky] at 3'0 clock in the early morning. Priests exclaimed that a good man must have been born in Sri Lanka.[10]

Also, a number of MGR films underscored this supposed greatness of MGR in a specific political fashion. Normally, the dwelling place of MGR—the hero—in these films was shown to be decorated with pictures of great political, religious and literary personalities, such as Jesus Christ, Thiruvalluvar, Vallalar, Subramania Bharati, M.K. Gandhi (the mandatory), C.N. Annadurai and K. Kamaraj [see, for instance, *Rickshawkaran* (1971) and *Pallandu Vazhga* (1975)]. MGR's own greatness being affirmed through the storyline and other devices in the course of the films, his personality automatically overflows and merges with that of those displayed—as if they belong to the past and MGR to the present.

Thus, in both real life and on the screen, MGR was presented as one among the common people, and, at the same time, he was distinct from and stood above them. Perhaps, we may mention here that this is very similar to the manner in which fascist propaganda projected Hitler:

> …one of the basic devices of personalized fascist propaganda is the concept of the "great little man", a person who suggests both omnipotence and the idea that he is just one of the folks, a plain, red-blooded American, untainted by material or spiritual wealth.[11]

Adorno, employing Freud's psychoanalytic categories, shows that such presentation leads the common people to identify with the idealised leader as the compensation for the lack in their lives and at the same time to remain attached to those parts of their ego which have not been thrown into the leader image.[12]

[1] Lakshmanan, Vidwan V. (1985). *Makkal thilagam MGR* (in Tamil). Madras, pp. 48–490.

[2] Ponmudi, Jeya. (1985). *Sathya mainthan sadanai* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 15.

[3] Ryerson, Charles. (1988). *Regionalism and religion: The Tamil renaissance and popular Hinduism*. Madras, pp. 154–55.

[4] M. Karunanidhi, writing about DMK processions in his autobiography, noted: 'An American student doing research on our movement told me that no political movement in the world has wielded public speech, drama, cultural functions, newspapers and posters as powerful weapons. We should add to this list processions also.' [Karunanidhi, M. (1987). *Nenchukku needhi* (Vol. II) (in Tamil). Madras, p. 227.]

[5] *Aside*, 18 March 1989.

[6] The way in which MGR got his honorary doctorate was scandalous. The recipients of the honour were informed in advance by the university to enable them to get their academic gowns stitched in time. But the people responsible for selecting the candidates were kept in the dark. An hour before the convocation, the Vice-Chancellor, Dr N. Santappa, presented a list of eleven names to the university senate and sought its approval. Not wanting to disrupt the convocation, the senate approved the list after registering its protest over the manner in which it had been treated.

[7] In 1984, when MGR was ailing, a rickshaw-puller in Madras, named Subramanian, slashed his body with blades as an offering to the deity Karumariamman so that MGR would recover. When he was told, 'It would have been useful if you had donated your kidney to MGR', he exclaimed, 'How handsome and fair complexioned MGR is? How will my blood or kidney fit him?' (*Thuglak*, 15 November 1984).

[8] Ponmudi, Jeya. (1988). *Doctor MGR veera kaviyam* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 10.

[9] *Vetri Selvar MGR veera varalaru*. (n.d.), p. 5.

[10] Velan, Kalaipadam. (n.d.). *Naan yean piranthean? Puratchi thalaivar MGR* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 5.

[11] Adorno, Theodor W. (1978). Freudian theory and the pattern of fascist propaganda. In *Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt* (Eds), New York: The Essential Frankfurt School Reader.

[12] Ibid.

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While most of the elements which constituted the cinematic MGR could be reconciled with his *real* life by means of projecting and popularising a particular biography of his, MGR's *personal* life was quite contradictory to the monogamous familial norms, which he time and again preached on the screen. In fact, his real life would, within the cultural codes of Tamil society, meet all the requirements of a notorious home breaker. First of all, he married thrice and was living with his third wife, V.N. Janaki, while his second wife was still alive. Secondly, he married his third wife while her earlier husband was still alive.

These facts were generally treated as *personal* and, thus, excluded from what was *political*. They, however, surfaced occasionally in the realm of Tamil politics to deride MGR. The contradiction between these facts of MGR's actual life and the cinematic fiction of MGR starrers was resolved by employing different modes of argument. Let me take up the first fact. The manner in which it was legitimised can be seen from the argument presented in an adulatory book on MGR, published both in Tamil and English. The book *recorded*:

> …In 1949, when he [MGR] was staying at Coimbatore for the shooting of *Mandiri Kumari*, he happened to open the day's newspaper and was pleasantly shocked. A budding actress, who had an uncanny resemblance to his first wife, was staring at him from the pages of that newspaper. She was V.N. Janaki…and MGR thought for a moment that his beloved wife had come back alive…Destiny had a pleasant shock for MGR when he was

> teamed with V.N. Janaki for the movie *Maruthanattu Ilavarasi*…During the shooting of *Maruthanattu Ilavarasi*, MGR and Janaki moved closely and subsequently love blossomed between the two stars. The bedridden Sadanandavati [MGR's second wife] in a noble gesture approved of the union of MGR and Janaki…
>
> In 1959, MGR was hurt in a mishap…Janaki rushed to his house crying uncontrollably and the moment she saw Sadanandavati they flew into a sorrowful embrace…From then on Janaki lived in MGR's house and was married to MGR legally after Sadanandavati expired in 1962.[1]

Thus, MGR's infidelity which went against his professed cinematic message was legitimised because of the woman in question resembling and representing his first wife and the alleged approval by his second wife. The popular biographies of MGR do not strain that far to score the argument. They simply present the second and third marriages of MGR as separate events, and are completely silent about the intervening period when MGR lived with both the women.[2]

The fact that Janaki had been married earlier and that her husband was still alive when she married MGR is completely left out of the popular biographies. Instead, she is presented as the self-effacing and dedicated wife of MGR, as if her past has ceased to exist. This silence in the popular biographies distances MGR from the image of being a *home-breaker*. The only time in the recent past that Janaki's earlier life was dragged into the realm of politics was during the February 1989 Assembly elections. Here again the issue was resolved in favour of MGR. It was argued, 'If MGR accepted her [Janaki] and gave her a new life out of magnanimity, it does not mean that she is chaste.'[3] It is not the infallible MGR who came to be accused, but *unchaste* Janaki. Also, through this perverse argument, MGR's image as a renouncer of status (by accepting *unchaste* Janaki) was emphasised once again.

[1] Jagathrakshakan, S. (1988). *Dr. MGR: A phenomenon*. Madras, pp. 30–31.

[2] Ponmudi, Jeya. (1988). *Doctor MGR veera kaviyam* (in Tamil). Madras, pp. 55–58. See also Velan, Kalaipadam. (n.d.). *Naan yean piranthean? Puratchi thalaivar MGR* (in Tamil). Madras, pp. 13 and 15.

[3] Pandian, M.S.S. & V. Geetha (18 March 1989). Jayalalitha: Sworn Heir. *Economic and Political Weekly, XXIV* (11).

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In short, through a particular construction of MGR's biography, his real life was portrayed as an imitation of his films. This obliteration of the distance between the cinematic and the real life was effective in popular consciousness. Writing about MGR fan clubs, a research study observes:

> The members [of fan clubs] are not able to go beyond the impressions created through the films and MGR's character is believed to be what is depicted in his films. This is clear from the fact that when the followers were asked to substantiate their contention that MGR is a good or principled man, they invariably cited instances from his films.
>
> Interestingly, one follower even quoted a duet from one of MGR's films to point out that even in the company of his beloved, MGR is concerned about the poor. The song runs something as follows: When the heroine sings, 'Oh! Tides recede, my lover is here', MGR replies, 'Oh! The receding tides, go and wipe the tears of the poor.'[1]

M.N. Nambiar, who acted as a ruthless villain in a number of MGR films, vouches for this in terms of his own hilarious experience with MGR fans. Soon after *Yenga Veetu Pillai* (1965), in which Nambiar appeared as a whip-wielding landlord, was released, Nambiar was confronted by a few enraged MGR fans demanding to know why he had beaten up MGR. It took Nambiar a lot of effort to convince them that it was all mere acting before the camera and not real.[2]

The most resounding proof of how the followers of MGR did not differentiate between MGR, the image, and MGR, the real, came out quite evidently from what they did during his serious illness in 1984.

In *Oli Vilakku* (1970), MGR, the hero, carries on a losing battle with death. The widow to whom the hero has earlier provided asylum sings to God, with inconsolable sorrow, to spare the hero's life and take away her's instead:

Lord,
there are so many lamps
in your temple.
The light of my hope
is at your feet.

I wash your feet with tears
that he may live.
If the heavens beckon unto
this generous and noble man,
what would happen to the earth.

I will come with you
and lay down my life
so that he may live.

This song echoed throughout Tamil Nadu when MGR was ailing. A number of cinema halls projected this song sequence before screening any film. If God replied to this song of grief on the screen by sparing MGR's much valued life, it did happen in real life too. He survived to the jubilation of his followers. After MGR's recovery, another song from *Idaya Kani* (1975), again an MGR starrer, pervaded Tamil Nadu. The song began with the following lines,

Long may you live,
that the country may prosper.

In the post-1972 period, it became the burden of DMK propaganda to break this overlap between the cinematic and the real. The DMK leaders, time and again, unsuccessfully reminded the people that MGR's cinema and his politics were different: 'The government of MGR, who has acted as peasant [in cinema], shot dead peasants in Vagaikulam; the government of MGR, who has acted as the friend of fishermen, shot dead innocent fishermen…We have sufficiently cheated ourselves by relying on films.'[3]

During the initial days of the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK), the DMK press and the DMK party functionaries, including M. Karunanidhi, referred to ADMK as *Nadigar Katchi* [party of the actor].

A number of DMK propaganda songs of this period derided cinema as misleading. To cite one such DMK propaganda song: 'Fooled by songs and films/he'd [MGR's fan] even tattooed his arms/Can pebbles be diamonds?/Can parties without principles thrive?' These songs, which are sung at the DMK public meetings by professional singers committed to party ideology and sold in the form of inexpensive booklets, carried such evocative titles as *Cinema Soru Poduma?* (Would Cinema Feed Us?).[4] It was, however, too late for the DMK which had consciously promoted this alleged unity between the real and the cinematic during the pre-1972 period for its own political advancement.

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1 Ramasamy, G.K. (1979), Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation. *The MGR mantrams: A study in political sociology*, Bangalore: University of Bangalore, p. 55.

2 *Cinema Express*, 1 October 1988.

3 *Junior Vikadan*, 2 March 1988.

4 For instance, see *Rasappa-Rani Kalai Kuzhu*, 1980.

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Given this specific real-life image of MGR, it became possible for him to distribute the causes for the ever-increasing corruption and oppression in his rule among others—the officials, ministers and lower level party functionaries. His *good samaritan* image was, thus, once again asserted.

Here, we have to note that an important feature of the subaltern common sense is its inability to establish the interconnections between the particular and the general. This fragmentary nature of common sense essentially means that while subaltern classes can make sense of what is immediate in time and space, they often fail to grasp fully what is remote.[1] For instance, they would perceive a local policeman, corrupt official or a village-level party functionary as unacceptable; but they would have only hazy and incoherent ideas about the state as a generalised category, responsible for their sufferings. In the words of Hobsbawm:[2]

> At the bottom of the social hierarchy…the criteria of social definition are either too narrow or too global for class consciousness. In one sense, they may be entirely localised, since the village community, the district or some other limited area is in fact the *real* society and economy that matters, the rest of the world making only remote and occasional incursions into it…Yet in another sense these criteria may be so general and universal as to exclude any proper social self-classification.

This fragmentary character of the subaltern common sense is what MGR, given his carefully constituted image, effectively manipulated

to his own political advantage.

MGR and the All India ADMK (AIADMK) repeatedly offered the argument that it was the all pervasive officialdom and bureaucracy which stood in between them and the people, and frustrated their well meaning policies. At one point of time, the AIADMK party functionaries constantly subjected the officials and the police to such virulent criticism that MGR had to personally intervene and instruct them not to accuse the officialdom as whole but only specific officials.[3]

Similarly, in February 1983, MGR attacked the judiciary on the floors of the state assembly for blocking his government's development efforts. He said, 'The judges are blocking [with stay orders] every measure of the government. It should be remembered that sentries are provided at the residence of the judges by the government, even for judges who give adverse judgement.'[4] MGR not only presented the officials as responsible for the failure of his rule,[5] but also declared even his cabinet colleagues as corrupt. In 1986, he openly declared that he would soon remove all the corrupt ministers from his cabinet.[6]

Along with such public utterances which helped MGR to retain his distinct image, he often rather dramatically demonstrated in public that it was others who separated him from the people. Take, for instance, the following event that took place in Madurai city on the New Year day of 1987. In the morning of that day when MGR appeared in public to receive petitions, people rushed forward to reach out to him. The policemen on duty prevented them. They reasoned that it would lead to the collapse of the wooden barricades that separated the people from their leader. A visibly enraged MGR ordered the policemen away and asked his personal assistant to bring him the policeman whom he thought was the chief offender.

The policemen fell at the feet of MGR and publicly apologised.[7] Such events of barricade breaking were not uncommon during MGR's political career.

If MGR could, thus, project others as corrupt and preserve his image, it is because the lower levels of the bureaucracy and party structure in the state were characterised by enormous corruption. And the subaltern classes perceived them as such, since they constantly came in contact with these frustrating structures in their everyday lives. A case study of how the state-sponsored Integrated Rural Development Programme was implemented in a Ramanathapuram village tells the all too familiar story:

> …the rich farmer of the village, who was also active in politics, had taken the initiative in getting as many benefits as possible for his village. He was on close terms with the block staff and also with the Ramanathapuram District Cooperative Credit Bank (RDCC). The B[lock] D[evelopment] O[fficer] being under pressure to reach the financial target welcomed his 'initiative' and used his influence with the RDCC in getting loans quickly sanctioned. The President of the RDCC's branch in the village was also included as a beneficiary and this helped. The *karnam* cooperated in issuing certificates without even referring to the Village Land Register. Since his own lands were in another village, he issued an 'agricultural labourer' certificate to his wife. He could not refuse the same treatment to others. We were told that naturally the rich farmers had to choose persons who were creditworthy. Even the 9 S[cheduled] C[aste] beneficiaries owned more than 2 acres each and further worked as regular employees of the rich landlords in the village. Those who had overdues, were advised by some bank officials to apply in the names of their wives. The Grama sevak was persuaded to distribute the hand-operated sprayers to a flour-mill owner, who had been classified as an agricultural labourer, because nobody could he found in the village to buy it even with the 33 1/3 percent subsidy.[8]

This interlocking of the interests of the local elite, politicians and the officials gave a specific authenticity and concreteness to MGR's

utterances and public behaviour. Significantly, during MGR's rule, all the local level democratic institutions were immobilised and were managed by the state officials. Throughout this period, elections for the 30,000 cooperatives in the state—including the 4650 Primary Agricultural Credit Societies which covered 80 per cent of the agricultural families and met 40 per cent of agricultural credit needs—were not held.[9] Likewise, till 1986, no election was held for the 13,200 panchayats and 376 panchayat unions in Tamil Nadu. Both these institutions were managed by officials, accommodating a lot of interventions by local-level party functionaries.

If anyone were to complain to the followers of MGR about the corruption and ruthless oppression which were the prominent features of his rule, their wistful response was, ‘If only MGR knew…’ The following excerpts from a dialogue between two groups of rickshaw-pullers, one belonging to the AIADMK and the other to the DMK, mediated by a reporter from a Tamil fortnightly, shows how successful MGR was in this regard:

AIADMK: Our Chief Minister is a good man. He asks his subordinates to pursue matters. But they are not doing so.

Reporter: But MGR knows that they are not doing things.

AIADMK: They inform MGR that they are doing.

Reporter: What did MGR say when he left the DMK?

DMK: He said, ‘We will not take bribe. We will have a just rule’.

AIADMK: He doesn't take bribe. In his name, others—this minister, that minister—take bribe. Because of this, MGR gets a bad name.

DMK: In the AIADMK rule, we have to give bribes.

AIADMK:…Population has increased. [I don't know] whether to blame the [MGR] rule or the government.

Reporter: Aren't the rule and the government same?

AIADMK: The rulers are doing things properly. But those who implement are not doing things rightly. They swallow half the money…

Reporter: Those who rule are like employers. Officers are like workers…Workers should behave according to employers' words?

AIADMK: I shall explain. Let us suppose there is a manager and a *maistry.* The top person gives the manager Rs. 30 which is to be given to the *maistry.* What does the manager do? He tells the *maistry* that his salary is only Rs. 10 and gives him that. He pockets the rest of the Rs. 20.[10]

Interestingly, a reporter of a popular Tamil weekly, *Junior Vikadan*, who went to a small village called Vepanthittai to investigate into the widespread police atrocities against the local populace, reported that local women pointed to him and whispered to each other, 'He must have been sent by MGR [to find out the truth].'[11]

The DMK repeatedly brought up charges of corruption against MGR, but failed to gain any substantial political mileage out of it. This is despite the fact that MGR, among other things, thrived in unaccounted money, and, at one point, he himself admitted that he had disclosed ₹80 lakhs of black money to the government under voluntary disclosure schemes.[12]

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[1] Patnaik, Arun K. (1988). Gramsci's concept of ommonsense: Towards a theory of subaltern consciousness in hegemony process, review of political economy. *Economic and Political Weekly, XXIII* (5), 30 January.

[2] Hobsbawm, E.J. (1971). Class consciousness in history. In Istvan Meszarous (Ed.), *Aspects of history and class consciousness*. London, p. 9.

[3] *Dinamani*, 21 March 1980.

[4] *Probe India*, August 1983.

[5] A journalistic report concluded, '…MGR appears to take a special delight in being rude to officers. Often he will not even offer a chair to an officer he has summoned. Until 1977, only one IAS officer had resigned from service in the state. Since MGR took over, more than 20 had resigned' (*India Today*, 31 July 1987).

[6] *Puthiya Jananayagam*, 1 November 1986.

[7] See *Dinamani*, 2 January 1987 and *Dinamani*, 18 April 1987.

[8] Madras Institute of Development Studies. (August 1980). *Structure and intervention: An evaluation of DPAP, IRDP and related programmes in Ramanathapuram and Dharmapuri districts in Tamil Nadu*. Madras, pp. 77–78 and Gebert, Rita (28 January 1989). Poverty alleviation and village politics in Tamil Nadu: Whose interest first? *Economic and Political Weekly, XXIV* (4).

[9] Rajagopal, A. (29 October 1988). Tamil Nadu cooperative movement in peril. *Economic and Political Weekly, XXIII* (44).

[10] *Thuglak*, 1 August 1987.

[11] *Junior Vikadan*, 27 July 1985.

[12] *The Statesman*, 25 December 1987.

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The proof of any idea—in this case MGR as an idea—becoming an element of *popular mentality* or common sense depends on how far people adhere to that idea with unquestioning faith. In other words, the idea should become part of the cultural presuppositions of the subaltern classes. In the beginning of this essay, I provided several examples of how the supporters of MGR were emotionally attached to MGR as an idea (including their willingness to lay down their lives for the sake of their leader). Here, I shall provide details of some more sociocultural manifestations in which their unfaltering faith in MGR comes out quite clearly. The sociocultural manifestations in question here are the ways in which MGR's subaltern followers invested in him divinity and magical powers.

The spectacular second conference of the All World MGR Fans Association, held in Madurai in 1986, witnessed an unusual event. As part of the conference procession, one of the MGR fans pulled a temple car (*thaer*), carrying a cut-out of MGR, for no less than nine kilometres. In an act of self-mortification, the temple car was attached to his body with iron hooks which pierced the flesh of his back. The cut-out, which was of MGR as he appeared in the blockbuster *Arasa Kattalai* (1967), showed him in royal costumes and wielding a sword.[1]

Such painful violation of one's body is done in rural Tamil Nadu only as penance or as part of fulfilling some vow made to the gods and goddesses of non-Brahminic folk Hinduism, whose followers are

by and large drawn from lower castes/classes. In this sense, the Madurai event was part of the process of investing MGR with god-like status—even when he was alive. After his death, such events proliferated. On the eve of MGR's first death anniversary, a bus-load of his followers, wearing black shirts, red dhotis and white towels representing, thus, the three colours of the AIADMK flag, came in pilgrimage to a small temple dedicated to MGR at his former residence in Ramavaram gardens, Madras city.

Before undertaking the pilgrimage, these devout followers of MGR abstained from earthly pleasures, such as drinking and smoking for a full month, and also religiously wore a chain with an MGR locket which they planned to remove on their return after completing the pilgrimage. The rituals followed by the MGR devotees have a close resemblance to the rituals followed by the Ayyappa devotees in preparation for pilgrimage to Sabari Malai in the high hills of Kerala. Several thousand Tamils go on pilgrimage to Sabari Malai every year during the months of December, January, and, to a lesser extent, in April. One of the MGR pilgrims earnestly reasoned, 'In some religions, gods have been born as human beings. Don't people worship them? Our god is MGR….'[2]

An erstwhile AIADMK MLA, Era Tamaraikani, has constructed a small shrine for his leader outside his house and people offer prayers there. As a news report puts it, 'It is possible to see people, who have bathed in the tank nearby, stop by the shrine in their wet garments and offer prayers to the idol of MGR in the shrine.'[3] In Madras city, two of MGR's followers—an unemployed cook and a store owner—have built a shrine for MGR. The poor cook sold his bicycle and his wife's jewels to raise the required money. At the shrine, MGR's followers take every measure to enlist his powers. Each Friday the idol is bathed, and a short ritual is performed by a

Brahmin. Coconuts are broken, and flowers and bananas are offered. An occasional pedestrian lights camphor and prays before the shrine. School children stop by to seek MGR's blessings. So do a few factory workers and government employees. Dorai Manoharan, a security guard, prays daily at the shrine to thank MGR for his miraculous intervention: Manoharan's wife conceived a child last year, a few months after he prayed at the shrine. ‘Our son is a gift from MGR’, he says. At the moment the shrine's fame is limited to the immediate neighbourhood. But Govindaraj Ganapathi, an MGR devotee, is convinced that this is only the beginning. ‘After 100 years’, he predicts, ‘MGR will be revered by Tamils as a great mythological hero. People will say his rule was as golden as Rama's.’[4] And some of the MGR devotees organised an *Idaya Deivam MGR Bhaktargal Kuzhu* (God of Our Heart MGR Devotees Association).[5]

Investing MGR with divinity is, in a sense, an extension of the pre-existing political practice of the DMK. After the death of C.N. Annadurai, his grave in Madras has almost become a revered site for the committed DMK cadres.

> Women circumambulate and touch the Eternal Flame at the *Samadhi* just as they would in a temple. Sometimes they light camphor at the *Samadhi* and, in the early days, some even shaved their heads there as they would at pilgrim centres like Palani and Tirupathi.[6]

Interestingly, while organising a massive protest rally against the DMK rule during November 1972, MGR asked his women followers not to participate in the rally. Instead, he asked the believers among them to go to temples and the non-believers to the statues of C.N. Annadurai and offer prayers so that the *authoritarianism and oppression* would end in Tamil Nadu.[7] This deification of the heroes

and the consequent statue cult of the DMK (and the AIADMK) only point out the limits of DMK-style rationalism. Having ousted God from his customary space, the DMK and the AIADMK leaders constituted their own pantheon. MGR was the most successful of this pantheon.

In the same manner, the subaltern followers of MGR attributed him with magical/thaumaturgical powers. According to a well-known film photographer, N.K. Viswanathan, when MGR was returning after the shooting of a film, his car was blocked by a peasant who asked MGR to step on his field which MGR did. The favoured peasant took a handful of earth from where MGR stood in the field and scattered it all over the field.[8] A similar instance is also narrated by a close associate of MGR and a Tamil journalist, Manian. During an election campaign tour, an old woman blocked the car in which MGR was travelling and asked him to walk on her parched field so that it would rain.[9] MGR obliged.

The most interesting of such incidents was the recent and widely reported story of MGR appearing in one of the eyes of a bull in Tittacheri village. The bull was decorated with garlands and *kumkumam*, and it was advertised, 'Womenfolk! Blood Brothers! The bull with our Honourable Chief Minister, who has magical powers, in its eye, visits Thiruvaroor. Witness it and witness the greatness of our revolutionary leader.' The bull was taken to various villages for display. A fee of ₹1 per head was charged to see the bull, and on an average 500 people came to see this privileged bull every day.[10]

The widespread belief among the MGR followers in his magical powers comes out clearly from the presence of an extensive market in Tamil Nadu for lockets, key chains, rings, stickers, wall calendars, posters and T-shirts with MGR's image. These articles are sold in urban pavements and rural fairs. Those who use them, apart from

openly asserting their political identity, do believe that MGR augurs good. This veritable terrain of kitsch is accompanied by the faith that if MGR christened a child, it did good to the child—a sort of transference of MGR's greatness to the child. In every public meeting, men and women scrambled to get their young ones named by MGR. MGR always named them willingly and cheerfully.

In the context of MGR being invested with magical powers and divinity, one needs to keep two points in mind. First, these practices are well embedded in the pre-existing cultural idioms of the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu. Second, the political elite in Tamil Nadu often promoted such cultural practices. I shall briefly elaborate each of these points.

Deification of human beings is a generalised religio-cultural practice in Tamil Nadu, particularly among the non-Brahmin castes. People deify the good, the troublesome and the heroic. They also deify unmarried women who die premature deaths and married women who die during child-birth.[11] The ever proliferating Amman (mother goddess) temples in Tamil Nadu, in which frequently women who died are worshipped, will bear out this fact. This lack of a clear-cut distinction between the divine and the human in Tamil popular culture was well captured by Moffatt.[12] He writes:

> Evidence that humans and gods are not so opposed, however, or that their opposition is a far subtle matter culturally than Western dualism suggests, is as follows. Human actors of any caste rank…can be thought to rank above certain gods, and therefore to be capable of commanding them, even when they still desire favourable action from the divine *shakti* of the lower divine beings. Also, humans can themselves possess or acquire *shakti*, and be worshipped as gods by other humans (and possibly by other gods). Finally, humans often become gods after death…, and gods continually incarnate themselves as humans, both openly and covertly. All this suggests…that

> the key distinction in Indian religion is not between 'human' and 'supernatural' but between worshippers and worshipped….

Interestingly, the author of a recent book on the village deities of Tirunelveli district in southern Tamil Nadu has dedicated the book to 'Our ancestors who are [today's] village deities.'[13] Writing about South India in 1921, Rev Whitehead noted, 'It is easy to observe a deity in the making even at the present day.'[14] Whitehead is indeed still relevant; Tamil Nadu of the 1970s and 1980s saw in MGR a deity in the making.

Likewise, magical practices are also a predominant element of the everyday ethnography of the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu. Rituals relating to both crop cycles and human life cycles as well as indigenous medical practices are strongly marked with magical practices.[15] Thus, the response of MGR's followers to him as an idea is organically rooted in their received cultural universe or common sense.

Let me now turn to how these practices were encouraged by the political elite in Tamil Nadu. First and foremost, MGR's constituted divinity was repeatedly emphasised on the screen. In *Chandrodayam* (1966), MGR, the hero, forces the local landlord to marry the girl whom he has earlier raped. The grateful girl refers to the hero and says, 'I see god in you. You are a human incarnation of god' and his modest dwelling place becomes for her *the abode of god*. In *Ayirathil Oruvan* (1965), the heroine, a princess, is to be auctioned off as a slave and she is forced, under the threat of the whip, to dance before the bidders. She sings, hoping fervently that the hero will appear to rescue her: 'I am dancing, but not dancing/I am looking out for my god'. In *Thanipiravi* (1966), the heroine dreams of MGR as Lord Murugan, the indigenous god of eternal youth who dwells in the six holy shrines of Tamil Nadu. The locale of

this particular sequence in the film was the much revered Thiruparamkuntram, one of the six holy shrines of Lord Murugan. During the 1989 elections, the Jayalalitha faction of the All Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) issued election posters carrying a still from this film showing a clean-shaven MGR as Lord Murugan and Jayalalitha as his consort. The Jayalalitha faction contested on the rooster symbol, which is the sign of Murugan in Hindu mythology.[16]

As soon as MGR died, one of his close associates and a beneficiary of his rule, Jeppiyar, announced that he was planning to construct a temple for MGR on the outskirts of Madras city on a sprawling 20 acre plot.[17] The proposed temple, which however never came up, was to have a hall for meditation. Janaki Ramachandran, the last of MGR's wives, consecrated a temple-like memorial for MGR in her residence and announced that she would conduct marriages of AIADMK loyalists before the picture of MGR that was kept in the memorial.[18] And, as I have already noted, the AIADMK MLA Tamaraikani did construct a shrine for MGR outside his house.

In the same vein, *Rathatin Rathame* (1989), a film released after MGR's death, emphasises that MGR's invisible presence is always there to establish justice and save the Tamil people. The hero of the film, who drives an auto-rickshaw with the registration number MGR 4777, becomes invisible when he wears a special bracelet. The hero in this invisible state assumes the name *Vathiyar* (a pet name by which MGR was referred to by his followers, especially during his early career), who checks corruption in fair price shops and saves women in distress. He declares that only his body has gone but his spirit will always save the Tamils. The voice of the invisible hero in the film is the imitated voice of MGR himself. The film was produced and acted in by K. Bhagyaraj, whom MGR once declared his heir,

apparently in the film world. The film was a Tamil remake of the successful Hindi film *Mr. India*.

This enthusiasm of the party elite was accompanied by popular biographies of MGR urging their readers to inaugurate shrines for the departed leader. One of them wrote:

> People went to temples and offered prayers for MGR to live [long]. But he left the Tamil people. I feel that the government of Tamil Nadu should seek permission from the central government and construct a temple for MGR and organise prayers everyday.[19]

The author of this popular biography went on to say, 'I pray to God that he [MGR] should be born again in Tamil Nadu and save the people.' Another of these biographies offered a programme of action to the followers of MGR: 'Let us worship him who already dwells in the temple of our hearts. Let us construct shrines for him in every street.'[20]

The believed magical powers of MGR were also projected onto the popular mind by the political elite. A biography of MGR which was serialised in *Varanthira Rani*, for instance, narrated in detail how a paralysed child whose fate was written off by modern medical science, became normal after its grandmother made a vow in the name of MGR. To reinforce the authenticity of this story, the author digressed a bit to 'report' how even C.N. Annadurai was privileged with such powers. It claimed that a depressive maniac belonging to the Self-Respect Movement got himself cured by circumambulating Annadurai's grave and uttering the *mantra*, *Long Live Anna's Name* for 48 days.[21]

The state-controlled media too indulged in such propaganda, though infrequently. For example,

> The Tamil Nadu government's regional newsreel No. 258 produced by the state information department and compulsorily exhibited in all cinema houses, shows the Chief Minister, Mr. M.G. Ramachandran, fondling a polio-afflicted child which takes a morsel of the government's “nutritious noon meal.” The narrator claims that the child after taking the free meal for a few days was completely cured of the affliction and was able to walk. The state government made 105 copies of the newsreel to be exhibited all over the state.[22]

We have to recall here that the noon-meal scheme was personally identified with MGR.

In short, MGR as an idea that mediates elite politics has become an element of the subaltern common sense. And this assimilation was encouraged by the political elite and was carried out and internalised within the pre-existing cultural practices of the subaltern classes,[23] such as deification of human beings and belief in magic.

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1 *Puthiya Kalacharam*, August 1989.

2 *Junior Post*, 6 January 1988.

3 *See Aside*, 16 January 1989. On a similar temple in Madras, see *India Today* (Tamil version), 6–20 April 1990.

4 *Time*, 27 August 1990.

5 *Mantra Murasu*, 20 May 1987.

6 *Aside*, April 1979; see also, *Junior Vikadan*, 14 December 1988 and *Junior Post*, 16 December 1988.

7 *Dinamani*, 9 November 1972.

8 Tharuman, Nagai. (1987). *Chandiranai Pottrum Natchathirankal* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 254.

9 Manian. (n.d.). *Kaalathai Ventravar: Puratchi Thalaivar MGR in Vazhkai Kathai* (in Tamil). Madras, pp. 43–44.

10 *Junior Vikadan*, 3 September 1986 and *Junior Vikadan*, 3 December 1985.

11 See the following works in this regard: Beck, Brenda E.F. (1972). *Peasant society in Konku*. Vancouver, p. 207; Good, Anthony (July–December 1983). ‘A symbolic type and its transformation: The case of South Indian Ponkal’. *Contributions to Indian sociology* (New Series), 17 (2), p. 231; Inglis, Stephen.

(1980). *A village art of South India*. Madurai, p. 23 ; Jacob-Pandian, E. T. (1983). The sacred symbol of mother Goddesses in a Tamil village: A parochial model of Hinduism. In Giri Raj Gupta (Ed.), *Religion in modern India*. New Delhi, p. 205 and Moffatt, Michael. (1979). *An untouchable community in South India: Structure and consensus*. Princeton, p. 227.

12 Moffatt, Michael. (1979). *An untouchable community in South India: Structure and consensus*. Princeton, p. 234n.

13 Ramaswami, Thulasi. (1985). *Nellai mavatta nattuppura teyvangal* (in Tamil). Madras.

14 Whitehead, Henry. (1921). *The village Gods of South India*. Calcutta, p. 20.

15 Sivasubramanian, A. (1988). *Manthiram-Sadangugal* (in Tamil). Madras.

16 Soon after MGR's death, the AIADMK split into two factions. One faction was led by MGR's wife, Janaki, and the other by Jayalalitha, who had acted as heroine in a number of MGR films and was inducted into the AIADMK personally by MGR during the early 1980s.

17 *Dinathanti*, 20 January 1988.

18 *Dinathanti*, 25 September 1988.

19 Velan, Kalaipadam. (n.d.). *Naan yean piranthean? Puratchi thalaivar MGR* (in Tamil). Madras, p. 48.

20 *Vetri Selvar Veera Varalaru*, n.d.: 56.

21 The falsity of the story will be clear from the fact that the Self-Respect Movement ceased to exist in 1944 and was rechristened as Dravidar Kazhagam. Annadurai died in 1969, a quarter century after the Self-Respect Movement acquired its new form as Dravidar Kazhagam.

22 *The Statesman*, 31 October 1987. In a public interest litigation, Palani Baba challenged the exhibition of this newsreel. The petition was dismissed by the Madras High Court following the assurance from the government that it would withdraw the newsreel from circulation.

23 Investing leaders with divinity and magical powers have a long tradition in Indian politics. For details of this process during the independence struggle, see Amin, Shahid. (1984). ‘Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, c. 1921–22’. In Ranajit Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian history and society* (Vol. III). Delhi; Hardiman, David. (1987). *The coming of devi: Adivasi assertion in Western India*. Delhi and Sarkar, Sumit. (1984). ‘The conditions and nature of subaltern militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to non-cooperation, c. 1905–22’. In Ranajit Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian history and society* (Vol. III). Delhi, pp. 310–11.

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The story so far shows that MGR as an idea was so successful that the type of politics the subaltern classes chose to be part of, was delinked from their objective material situations. In other words, the subaltern classes sustained a politics which benefitted the elite. However, one has to note here that in no way was there a complete separation between the *material* and the *political*, and both these spheres were indeed connected in MGR's politics—but in a perverse way.

From the 1960s onwards, there was a period of acute economic distress for the poor in Tamil Nadu and a large section of them, both in rural and urban areas, were impoverished. In the rural areas, during the 1960s, there was a sharp rise in the number of agricultural workers and a decline in the number of cultivators. This process of obvious proletarianisation continued through the 1970s as well, but on a much reduced scale. This enlarged pool of dispossessed workers did not gain much during this period in terms of wages. Although the real wage rate did marginally increase during certain sub-periods, including the late 1970s, the real daily wage earned by agricultural workers in 1979–80 was still less than what they used to earn in 1951–52.[1] Also, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the agricultural sector suffered overpopulation and declining productivity.

> The continuing poor performance of agriculture has meant that its share in S[tate] D[omestic] P[roduct] has come down too—from around 40 per cent in the early seventies to the neighbourhood of 25 per cent in the early

> eighties…But there has not been a similar decline in the share of the labour force in agriculture: certainly not in absolute terms because the labour force itself has been growing over time; and not much decline in relative terms either. This means that productivity per person in agriculture has gone down and the relative productivity in agriculture has come down sharply.[2]

The towns in Tamil Nadu were, unfortunately, in no position to mitigate the bourgeoning crisis in the countryside. The urban expansion in the state, after reaching its peak in 1941–51, showed a decline thereafter. The new towns that sprung up during this period were not characterised by the necessary economic vibrancy to offer the rural migrants a better deal in terms of employment and income. Rather, they proved to be miserable asylums for such migrants. As a research study puts it:

> In Tamil Nadu, with its high level of urbanisation and town density, the scope for urban expansion, in the sense of emergence of new, dynamic, isolated towns, appears to have been exhausted. While a number of new towns still come up in the state, their emergence is perhaps not so much a reflection of the dynamism of the pull factor in these towns as of some agrarian distress in the rural areas, especially in the backward, dry, drought-prone areas of the state.[3]

In this harsh economic milieu, vast sections of the urban as well as rural workers were forced against their will to depend on the unorganised sector, where they were denied employment security, trade union rights and post-retirement benefits. They were paid a very low sweat wage for inhumanly long hours of work:

> In 1981, the organised sector accounted for 10.1 per cent of the total workforce (main workers) and 15.4 per cent of (main) workers in non-agricultural activities in the state.
>
> Thus we note that even though there is a marginal increase in the size of the organised sector in the twenty year period 1961–81 with respect to the

> total workforce size, the decrease in its size with respect to non-agricultural activities is a rather striking one of nearly 5 per cent points. During the period 1971–81 the growth rate of organised sector employment was 2.1 per cent in comparison to 2.7 per cent recorded for the decade 1961–71.[4]

In this situation of deprivation and despair, MGR could successfully enact his role as a messiah offering the millennium—both on and off the screen. The element of hope that MGR engendered in the popular mind was only enlarged through such populist schemes like the noon-meal scheme for the school-going children. What Hobsbawm wrote analysing the social bandits is quite true for MGR's Tamil Nadu: ‘Men can live without justice, and generally must, but they cannot live without hope.’[5]

The morphology of the riots that took over the city of Madras at the news of MGR's death vividly brought out this connection between the economic deprivation of the subaltern classes and the political success of MGR. MGR's death was, for them, the death of their hopes against the elite. Taking cover under the anonymity offered by the *mob*, they gave full vent to their economic grievances. They targeted establishments catering to the extravagant consumerist tastes of the rich and the elite residential areas for systematic attack and looting. They broke open and looted the Mangaldeep textile showroom, which by its sheer size and dazzling decor forbade entry to the less privileged, the McRennet Bakery, which sold expensive confectionery, the Bata showroom, which displayed its prohibitively priced designer shoes for the passers-by to gaze at, and the Buhari restaurant, known for its gourmet biryani. They entered the Witco Supreme showroom and leisurely walked away with plastic buckets, suitcases and toys. They looted the Reliance Photo Stores and Opticals of a large number of sunglasses. A newspaper report derisively noted, ‘The vandals were most probably dandies, the most

popular item with them was sunglasses. Almost the entire stock of the sunglasses has disappeared from the shop.'[6]

They had hardly anything to take away from Pals Restaurant, an expensive cabaret which is at once tempting and inaccessible to the city's poor. However, they directed a volley of stones at it and smashed its window panes. They also broke open a liquor shop and helped themselves liberally to bottles of Indian made foreign liquor, and had a temporary break from their illicitly brewed cheap arrack. In brief, their targets were those sites of high consumerism, from which they were excluded in normal times by the logic of the market.

Car and motor cycle owners were their other targets.

> The vandals turned their wrath mainly on people going in cars and on motor cycles and scooters…Quickly enough the cars disappeared from the roads. The scooter-riders were either assaulted or rudely ordered to get down and walk. Cyclists were not hindered initially. But after sometime even they were asked to get down and walk pushing their vehicles.[7]

It was, thus, the writ of the poor that ran on the Madras roads for those few hours and vehicles ceased to be a mark of social status in that short-lived world turned-upside-down. Denied even basic civic facilities in their wretched slums, the rioting poor concentrated their energies on the posh and well-kept neighbourhoods of College Road and Commander-in-Chief Road. They uprooted the tree-guards protecting young saplings in those areas and threw them on the road to block vehicular traffic.

If one of the rioters told a press reporter, 'Why should Madras survive when MGR has gone?'[8] he obviously meant, 'Why should the Madras of the rich survive when MGR has gone?'

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1 Kurien, C.T. (1989). *Dynamics of rural transformation: A study of Tamil Nadu 1950–1980*. Madras.

2 Madras Institute of Development Studies. (1988). *Tamil Nadu economy:* Performance and issues. Madras, p. 341.

3 Nagaraj, K. (1985). *Towns in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh: A study of population and spatial configuration 1961–71*. Working Paper 54, Madras: Madras Institute of Development Studies, p. 112.

4 Main workers were the ones who worked for 183 days or more in a year. See Madras Institute of Development Studies. (1988). *Tamil Nadu economy: Performance and issues*. Madras, p. 71.

5 Hobsbawm, E.J. (1985). *The Bandits*. Harmondsworth, p. 51.

6 *Indian Express*, 27 December 1987.

7 *Indian Express*, 25 December 1987.

8 *India Today*, 15 January 1988.

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In concluding the success story of MGR, which is at once the failure of a people, we may note that the unprecedented success of MGR in mobilising the subaltern classes, however, does not mean that his hegemonising sweep was total. On the contrary, the realm of politics in Tamil Nadu is characterised by multiple discourses, each engaged in a constant dialogue with the others. Apart from the supporters of MGR's AIADMK, there are in Tamil Nadu a large number of faithfuls of the DMK, the Congress (I), the left parties and others. There are others who have shifted their political allegiance from one party to another over time, and still others who disdainfully keep themselves away from parties and elections. While it is true that MGR was one of the most successful performers in Tamil politics, what has to be underscored is that Tamil politics is, even so, a contested terrain. Even among the committed supporters of MGR, political sensitivities are not completely dead. Resentment against the system exists among them, though in a muted and dormant form. Let us listen to the voices of those AIADMK and DMK rickshaw-pullers once again:

Reporter: You would have seen MGR in films. He fights and punishes the wrong-doers. Haven't you voted for MGR hoping that he would do the same in his rule also?

AIADMK: Those days he made films potraying people's rule. Is there any people's rule at present? We have only dictatorship…

Reporter: Who is the dictator?

AIADMK: (laughs)

DMK: He is asking you.

AIADMK: Who could be the head of the dictatorship? MGR is the president of the party. All this is happening without his knowledge.

Reporter: In films, whatever happens, he finds out [the truth] and beats up…

AIADMK: That is entertainment. Don't mix up things…

DMK:…What did he [MGR] promise and come to power…He promised in his mother's name that he would never open arrack shops…He cheated the people…What did he do once coming to power?…In the third year, he opened arrack shops…

AIADMK: He posed a challenge that he would become the Chief Minister. For that, he told a lie…Some people are dying without arrack. That is why he brought it back…

Reporter: For the sake of coming to power, he told the lie that he would not open arrack shops…How many other such lies he would have told…?

AIADMK: All parties, Congress downwards, improve themselves by telling lies…Only if you tell lies, things will happen…False cases succeed in the Supreme Court and the High Court. Genuine cases fail…One who tells a lot of lies moves to higher places. Those who speak the truth remain all the time in the dump.

Reporter: You told corruption cannot be eliminated…If corruption grows like this, things will become worse…

AIADMK: Throughout the country, bombs and atom bombs are being produced…Likewise, we have to also produce…[1]

The fact that politics is always a contested terrain and that even among the devoted followers of MGR there exist indelible marks of dissent, however emasculated they may be, are quite important.

Therein lie the possibilities of constituting the *other* of MGR style politics and creating a new progressive common sense.

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1 *Thuglak*, 1 August 1987.

Appendix I:
A Brief Chronology of MGR's Life

17 January 1917:	Born in Kandy, Sri Lanka.
17 January 1936:	Began his film career in *Sati Leelavati.*
17 January 1953:	Joined the DMK.
17 January 1962–64:	Member of the Legislative Council (MLC), Madras State.
12 January 1967:	Shot at and injured by a well-known co-actor, M.R. Radha.
12 January 1967:	Elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), from St. Thomas Mount constituency.
12 January 1970:	Appointed the treasurer of the DMK.
12 January 1971:	Re-elected as MLA from St Thomas Mount constituency.
12 January 1971:	Awarded the title *Bharat* for his role in *Rickshawkaran*. *Bharat* is Indian government's highest award for film acting.

9 October 1972:	Suspended from the DMK for violating party discipline.
17 October 1972:	Founded the ADMK, which was subsequently rechristened as the AIADMK.
June 1977:	Elected as an MLA from Aruppukottai constituency.
30 June 1977:	Sworn in as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu.
30 June 1978:	His last film, *Maduraiyai Meeta Sundarapandian* was released.
18 February 1980:	His ministry was dismissed by the Union government and president's rule was imposed in Tamil Nadu.
June 1980:	Elected as an MLA from Madurai (West) constituency.
9 June 1980:	Sworn in as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu for the second consecutive term.
October 1984:	Suffered a major paralytic stroke.
October 1984:	Elected as an MLA from Andipatti constituency, while ailing in a US hospital.
10 February 1985:	Sworn in as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu for the third consecutive term.
24 December 1987:	Died after prolonged illness.

Appendix II:
MGR's Filmography

Table A.1 In Tamil

Sl. No.	*Year*	*Name of the Film*	*Director*	*Producing Company*
1.	1936	Sati Leelavathi	Ellis R. Duncan	Manorama Films
2.	1936	Iru Sagotharargal	Ellis R. Duncan	Parameswar Sound Pictures
3.	1938	Dakshayagnam	Raja Chandrasekar	Metropolitan Pictures
4.	1938	Veera Jagathis	T.P. Kailasam and R. Prakash	V.S. Talkies
5.	1939	Maya Machindra	Raja Chandrasekar	Metropolitan Pictures
6.	1939	Prahalatha	P.N. Rao	Salem Shankar Films
7.	1941	Asok Kumar	Raja Chandrasekar	Murugan Talkies
8.	1941	Vedavathi or Seethajananam	T.R. Raghunath	Shyamala Pictures
9.	1942	Thasippen or Jyothi Malar	T.R. Raghunath	Bama Pictures
10.	1942	Tamizhariyum Perumal	Ramanathan	Uma Pictures
11.	1943	Harichandra	Nagabushnam	Sri Rajarajeswari Film Company

12.	1945	Meera	Ellis R. Duncan	Chandra Prabha Cinetone
13.	1945	Salivahanam	P.N. Rao	Bhaskar Pictures
14.	1946	Sri Murugan	A.S.A. Samy	Jupitor Pictures
15.	1947	Paithiakaran	Krishnan–Panju	N.S.K. Films (Tamilnadu Talkies)
16.	1947	Rajakumari	A.S.A. Samy	Jupitor Pictures
17.	1948	Abhimanyu	M. Somasundaram and A. Kasilingam	Jupitor Pictures
18.	1948	Mohini	Lanka Sathyan	Jupitor Pictures
19.	1948	Raja Mukthi	Raja Chandrasekar	Narendra Pictures
20.	1949	Rathnakumar	Krishnan–Panju	Murugan Pictures
21.	1950	Maruthanattu Ilavarasi	A. Kasilingam	G. Govindan and Co.
22.	1950	Mandiri Kumari	T.R. Sundaram and Ellis R. Duncan	Modern Theatres
23.	1951	Marmayogi	K. Ramnath	Jupitor Pictures
24.	1951	Sarvathakari	T.R. Sundaram	Modern Theatres
25.	1952	Andaman Kaithi	V. Krishnan	Radhakrishnan Films
26.	1952	Kumari	R. Padmanabhan	R. Padmanabhan
27.	1952	Yen Thangai	C.H. Narayanamoorthi and N.K.R. Nambiar	Asoka Pictures
28.	1953	Jenova	F. Nagoor	Chandra Pictures
29.	1953	Naam	A. Kasilingam	Mekala Pictures and Jupitor Pictures
30.	1953	Panakkari	Ramanathan	Uma Pictures
31.	1954	Malaikkallan	Sriramulu Naidu	Pakshiraja Films
32.	1954	Koondukkili	T.R. Ramanna	R.R. Pictures
33.	1955	Gul-E-Bakaavali	T.R. Ramanna	R.R. Pictures

34.	1956	Alibabavum Narpathu Thirudargalum	T.R. Sundaram	Modern Theatres
35.	1956	Madurai Veeran	Yoganand	Krishna Pictures
36.	1956	Thaikupin Tharam	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
37.	1957	Chakravarthy Thirumagal	P. Neelakantan	Uma Pictures
38.	1957	Mahadevi	Sunderrao Nadkarni	Sri Ganesh Movietone
39.	1957	Pudumaipithan	T.R. Ramanna	Sivakami Pictures
40.	1957	Rajarajan	T.V. Sundaram	Neela Productions
41.	1958	Nadodi Mannan	M.G. Ramachandran	Emgeeyar Pictures
42.	1959	Thai Magalukku Kattiya Thali	R.R. Chandran	Kalpana Kala Mandir
43.	1960	Bhagdad Thirudan	T.P. Sundaram	Southern Movies
44.	1960	Mannathi Mannan	Natesan	Natesa Pictures
45.	1960	Raja Desingu	T.R. Raghunath	Krishna Pictures
46.	1961	Arasilam Kumari	A.S.A. Samy	Jupitor Pictures
47.	1961	Nallavan Vazhvan	P. Neelakantan	Arasu Pictures
48.	1961	Sabash Mapillai	S. Raghavan	Ragan Productions
49.	1961	Thai Sollai Thattathe	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
50.	1961	Thirudathe	P. Neelakantan	A.L.S. Productions
51.	1962	KudumpaThalaivan	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
52.	1962	Madapura	S.A. Subburaman	P.V.N. Productions
53.	1962	Paasam	T.R. Ramanna	R.R. Pictures
54.	1962	Rani Samyuktha	Yoganand	Saraswathi Pictures
55.	1962	Thayai Kaatha Thanayan	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Pictures
56.	1962	Vikramathithan	T.R. Raghunath and M.S. Ramadass	Jaya Bharat Productions

57.	1963	Ananda Jyothi	V.N. Reddy and A.S.A. Samy	Hariharan Films
58.	1963	Dharmam Thalai Kakkum	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
59.	1963	Kalai Arasi	A. Kasilingam	Sarodi Pictures
60.	1963	Kanchi Thalaivan	A. Sivalingam	Mekala Pictures
61.	1963	Koduthu Vaithaval	P. Neelakantan	E.V.R. Pictures
62.	1963	Neethikkuppin Pasam	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
63.	1963	Panathottam	K. Shankar	Saravana Films
64.	1963	Parisu	Yoganand	Gowri Pictures
65.	1963	Periya Idathu Penn	T.R. Ramanna	R.R. Movies
66.	1964	Theiva Thai	P. Madavan	Sathya Movies
67.	1964	Yen Kadamai	M. Natesan	Natesa Pictures
68.	1964	Padakotti	P. Prakash Rao	Saravana Films
69.	1964	Panakkara Kudumbam	T.R. Ramanna	R.R. Pictures
70.	1964	Thayin Madiyil	A. Subba Rao	Annai Films
71.	1964	Thozhilali	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
72.	1964	Vettaikaran	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
73.	1965	Asai Mugam	P. Pullaiah	Mohan Productions
74.	1965	Ayirathil Oruvan	P.R. Pantulu	Padmini Pictures
75.	1965	Yenga Veettu Pillai	Chanakya	Vijaya Productions
76.	1965	Kalankarai Vilakkam	K. Sankar	Saravana Films
77.	1965	Kanni Thai	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
78.	1965	Panam Padaithavan	T.R. Ramanna	R.R. Pictures
79.	1965	Tazhampoo	M.S. Ramadoss	M.S. Ramadoss
80.	1966	Anbe Vaa	A.C. Thirulogachandar	A.V.M. Productions
81.	1966	Naan Anaiyittal	Chanakya	Sathya Movies
82.	1966	Mugarasi	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films

83.	1966	Nadodi	B.R. Pantulu	Padmini Pictures
84.	1966	Chandrodayam	K. Shankar	Saravana Screens
85.	1966	Parakkum Paavai	T.R. Ramanna	R.R. Pictures
86.	1966	Petralthan Pillaiya	Krishna–Panju	Sri Muthukumaran Pictures
87.	1966	Thali Bhagyam	K.P. Nagabushnam	Varalakshmi Pictures
88.	1966	Thanipiravi	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
89.	1967	Arasakattalai	M.G. Chakrapani	Sathyaraja Films
90.	1967	Kavalkaran	P. Neelakantan	Sathya Movies
91.	1967	Thaiku Thalaimagan	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
92.	1967	Vivasayee	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
93.	1968	Rahasiya Police 115	B.R. Pantulu	Padmini Pictures
94.	1968	Thaer Thiruvizha	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
95.	1968	Kudiyiruntha Koil	K. Shankar	Saravana Screens
96.	1968	Kannan Yen Kadalan	P. Neelakantan	Sathya Movies
97.	1968	Pudiya Boomi	Chanakya	Jeeyar Movies
98.	1968	Kanavan	P. Neelakantan	Valli Films
99.	1968	Oli Vilakku	Chanakya	Gemini Productions
100.	1968	Kathal Vaganam	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
101.	1969	Adimai Penn	K. Shankar	Emgeeyar Pictures
102.	1969	Namnaadu	Jambu	Vijaya International
103.	1970	Mattukara Velan	P. Neelakantan	Jayanthi Films
104.	1970	Yen Annan	P. Neelakantan	Venus Pictures
105.	1970	Thalaivan	P.A. Thomas	Thomas Pictures
106.	1970	Thedi Vantha Mappillai	B.R. Pantulu	Padmini Pictures
107.	1970	Yengal Thangam	Krishnan–Panju	Mekala Pictures
108.	1971	Kumarikottam	P. Neelakantan	K.C. Films

109.	1971	Rickshawkaran	M. Krishnan	Sathya Movies
110.	1971	Neerum Neruppum	P. Neelakantan	New Mani J. Productions
111.	1971	Oru Thai Makkal	P. Neelakantan	Nanjil Productions
112.	1972	Sange Muzhangu	P. Neelakantan	Valli Films
113.	1972	Nalla Neram	M.A. Thirumugam	Thevar Films
114.	1972	Raman Thedia Seethai	P. Neelakantan	Jayanthi Films
115.	1972	Annamitta Kai	M. Krishnan	Ramachandra Productions
116.	1972	Naan Yaen Piranthaen	M. Krishnan	Saravana Films
117.	1972	IdayaVeenai	Krishnan–Panju	Udayam Productions
118.	1973	Ulagam SutrumValiban	M.G. Ramachandran	Emgeeyar Pictures
119.	1973	Pattikattu Ponnaiya	P.S. Ranga	Vasanth Productions
120.	1974	Netru Intru Nalai	P. Neelakantan	Amalraj Pictures
121.	1974	Urumaikkural	Sridhar	Chitralaya
122.	1974	Sirithu Vazhavendum	S.S. Balan	Udayam Productions
123.	1975	Ninaithathai Mudipavan	P. Neelakantan	Oriental Pictures
124.	1975	Naalai Namathe	K.S. Sethumadhavan	Gajendra Films
125.	1975	Idaya Kani	A. Jaganathan	Sathya Movies
126.	1975	Pallandu Vazhga	K. Shankar	Udayam Productions
127.	1976	Neethikku Thalaivanangu	P. Neelakantan	Umayambigai Productions
128.	1976	Uzhaikkum Karangal	K. Shankar	K.C. Films
129.	1976	Oorukku Uzhaippavan	M. Krishnan	Venus Pictures
130.	1977	Navaratnam	A.P. Nagarajan	Vijayalakshmi Pictures
131.	1977	Intru Pol EntrumVazhga	K. Shankar	Subbu Productions
132.	1977	Meenava Namban	Sridar	Muthu Enterprises
133.	1978	Maduraiyai Meeta Sundarapandian	M.G. Ramachandran	Soleswarar Combines

Source: Kirupakaran, Che. (1987). *Tamil thiraipada illakiyam: M.G. Ramachandran naditha thiraipadangal* (in Tamil). Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation. Appendix, pp. 2–8, University of Madras, Madras.

Table A.2 In Other Languages

Sl. No.	*Year*	*Name of the Film*	*Director*	*Producing Company*
1. Hindi	1951	Ektha Raja	K. Ramnath	Jupitor Pictures
2. Telugu	1951	Sarvathikari	T.R. Sundaram	Modern Theatres
3. Malayalam	1953	Jenova	F. Nagoor	Chandra Pictures

***Source*:** Kirupakaran, Che. (1987). *Tamil thiraipada illakiyam: M.G. Ramachandran naditha thiraipadangal* (in Tamil). Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation. Appendix, pp. 2–8, University of Madras, Madras.

Appendix III: Electoral Performance of the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu

Table A.3 Legislative Assembly Election, Tamil Nadu, 1977

Parties	*No. of Seats Contested*	*No. of Seats Won*	*Percentage of Valid Votes Polled*
AIADMK	200	126	30.37
DMK	230	48	24.89
Congress (I)	198	27	17.51
Janata Party	233	10	16.66
CPI	32	5	2.91
CPI(M)	30	12	2.79

Source: Oza, D.K. (1982). *Report on the seventh general election to Lok Sabha, 1980.* Madras and R. Thandavan. (1985). 'AIADMK in Tamil Nadu: Its emergence and unprecedented growth'. *Indian Journal of Political Studies*, December.

Table A.4 Lok Sabha Election, Tamil Nadu, 1977

Parties	*No. of Seats Contested*	*No. of Seats Won*	*Percentage of Valid Votes Polled*
AIADMK	20	18	30.60
DMK	19	1	18.05
Congress (I)	18	3	17.67

Janata Party	15	14	22.27
CPI	3	3	4.60
CPI(M)	2	Nil	1.56

Source: Oza, D.K. (1982). *Report on the seventh general election to Lok Sabha, 1980.* Madras and R. Thandavan. (1985). 'AIADMK in Tamil Nadu: Its emergence and unprecedented growth'. *Indian Journal of Political Studies*, December.

Table A.5 Lok Sabha Election, Tamil Nadu, 1980

Parties	*No. of Seats Contested*	*No. of Seats Won*	*Percentage of Valid Votes Polled*
AIADMK	24	2	25.4
DMK	16	16	23.0
Congress (I)	23	20	31.6
Janata Party	9	Nil	8.0
CPI	3	Nil	3.6
CPI(M)	3	Nil	3.2
Muslim League	1	1	4.4

Source: Oza, D.K. (1982). *Report on the seventh general election to Lok Sabha, 1980.* Madras and R. Thandavan. (1985). 'AIADMK in Tamil Nadu: Its emergence and unprecedented growth'. *Indian Journal of Political Studies*, December.

Table A.6 Legislative Assembly Election, Tamil Nadu, 1980*

Parties	*No. of Seats Contested*	*No. of Seats Won*	*Percentage of Valid Votes Polled*
AIADMK	177	131	38.91
DMK	114	38	22.32
Congress (I)	112	30	20.73
CPI	16	10	2.82
CPI(M)	16	11	3.12

*Only the parties that polled more than 2 per cent votes are referred to in the table.

Source: Oza, D.K. (1982). *Report on the seventh general election to Lok Sabha, 1980.* Madras and R. Thandavan. (1985). 'AIADMK in Tamil Nadu: Its emergence and unprecedented growth'. *Indian Journal of Political Studies*, December.

Table A.7 Legislative Assembly Election, Tamil Nadu, 1984*

Parties	*No. of Seats Contested*	*No. of Seats Won*	*Percentage of Valid Votes Polled*
AIADMK	153	132	37.06
DMK	156	20	27.92
Congress (I)	71	62	16.43
Janata Party	16	2	2.47
CPI	17	5	2.93
CPI(M)	17	3	2.36

*Only the parties that polled more than 2 per cent votes are referred to in the table.
Source: Oza, D.K. (1982). *Report on the seventh general election to Lok Sabha, 1980.* Madras and R. Thandavan. (1985). 'AIADMK in Tamil Nadu: Its emergence and unprecedented growth'. *Indian Journal of Political Studies*, December.

Table A.8 Lok Sabha Election, Tamil Nadu, 1984*

Parties	*No. of Seats Contested*	*No. of Seats Won*	*Percentage of Valid Votes Polled*
AIADMK	12	12	18.78
DMK	25	1	24.43
Congress (I)	25	25	40.43
Janata Party	5	Nil	4.32
CPI(M)	3	Nil	2.92

*Only the parties that polled more than 2 per cent votes are referred to in the table.
Source: Oza, D.K. (1982). *Report on the seventh general election to Lok Sabha, 1980.* Madras and R. Thandavan. (1985). 'AIADMK in Tamil Nadu: Its emergence and unprecedented growth'. *Indian Journal of Political Studies*, December.
Note: During the 1977 Lok Sabha election, the AIADMK had the Congress (I) and the CPI as its major electoral allies; and the DMK had the Janata Party and the CPI(M) as its allies. During the 1977 Assembly Election, the AIADMK had the CPI (M) as its major electoral ally; and the Congress (I) and the CPI had an electoral alliance. The DMK and the Janata Party contested the election on their own.

During the 1980 Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, the AIADMK's major electoral allies were the Janata Party, the CPI and the CPI (M); and the DMK's major electoral ally was the Congress (I).

During the 1984 Lok Sabha and assembly elections, the AIADMK's major electoral ally was the Congress (I); and the DMK's major electoral allies were the Janata Party, the CPI and the CPI (M).

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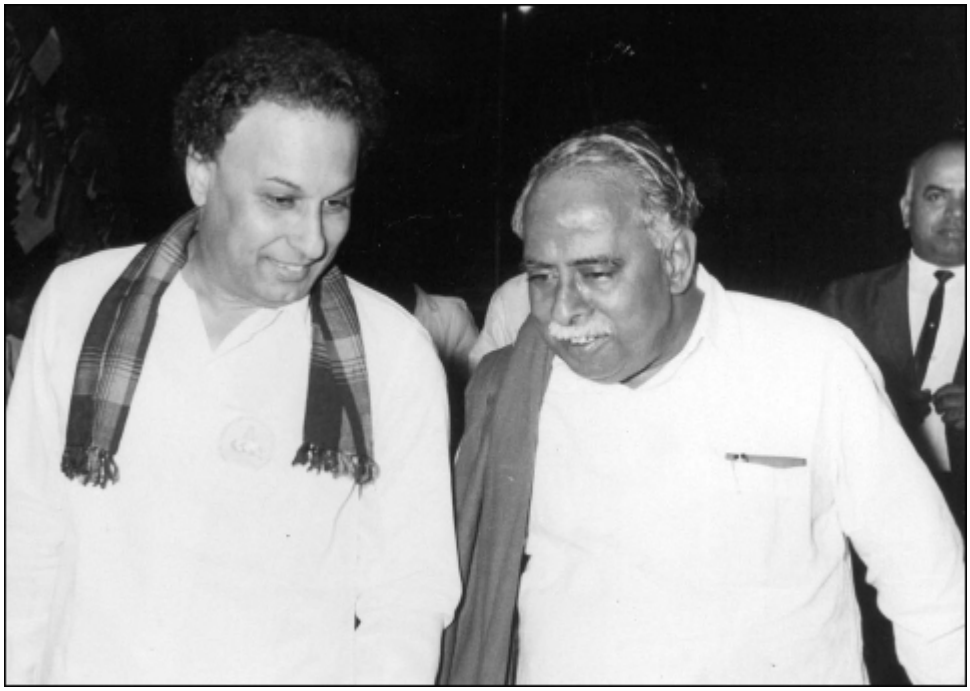
About the Author

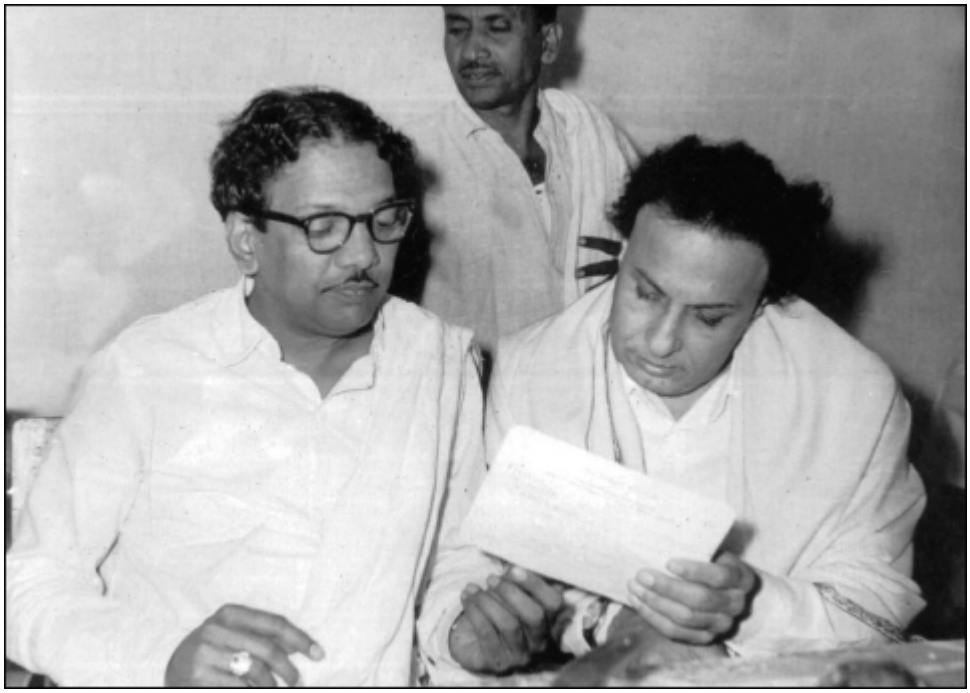
M.S.S. Pandian was Professor at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, since August 2009. Previously, he has been Rama Wattamul Distinguished Indian Scholar, University of Hawaii, Honolulu (2008); Visiting Fellow, Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge University, UK (2004); Visiting Professor in Human Sciences, George Washington University, Washington, D.C. (2002); Honorary Visiting Fellow, Sarai Programme, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi (2002–09); Visiting Professor of History, University of Wisconsin, Madison (2001); Fellow, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai (1989–2001); and Fellow, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (1986–88). His publications include *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (2007/2008); *The Image Trap: M G Ramachandran in Films and Politics* (SAGE, 1992); and *Political Economy of Agrarian Change: Nanchilnadu, 1880–1939* (SAGE, 1990). He has also co-edited *Muslims, Dalits and Fabrications of History: Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Vol. 12 (2005). The book is published posthumously but before his untimely death; he had approved the book for publishing.

1. MGR Addressing a Public Meeting
Courtesy: E. Ganaprakasam (Gnanam)



2. MGR with His Political Mentor, C.N. Annadurai
Courtesy: E. Ganaprakasam (Gnanam)

3. MGR Meeting His Political Cadres
Courtesy: E. Ganaprakasam (Gnanam)



4. MGR with His Political Rival and the Leader of the DMK, M. Karunanidhi
Courtesy: E. Ganaprakasam (Gnanam)

5. MGR as a Humble Villager in *Rajakumari*
Courtesy: E. Ganaprakasam (Gnanam)

6. MGR as Madurai Veeran in *Madurai Veeran*
Courtesy: E. Ganaprakasam (Gnanam)

7. MGR and Bhanumathi in *Alibabavum Narpathu Thirudarkalum*
Courtesy: *The Hindu Archives*

8. MGR in *Alibabavum Narpathu Thirudarkalum*
Courtesy: *The Hindu Archives*

9. MGR as Lord Murugan and J. Jayalalitha as His Consort in *Thanipiravi*
Courtesy: E. Ganaprakasam (Gnanam)

10. MGR Greeting a Gathering on his Return from a Global Tour in December 1978
Courtesy: *The Hindu Archives*

11. Milk *Abhishekam* Being Performed to the Statue of MGR in Tirupur
Courtesy: *The Hindu Archives*

12. A Huge Vinyl Hoarding Put Up in 2011 on the Occasion of the 24th Death Anniversary of MGR
Courtesy: *The Hindu Archives*

13. A Statue of MGR Garlanded with Flowers at Thanlayamangalam in Thiruvarur District
Courtesy: *The Hindu Archives*

14. An Autorickshaw Decorated with a Picture of MGR and Flying the AIADMK Flag
Courtesy: *The Hindu Archives*

15. The Statue of MGR in Anna Salai in Madras
Courtesy: *The Hindu Archives*